

BANGLADESH

USCIRF has become increasingly concerned about the religious freedom situation in Bangladesh. While the government has made some progress in returning seized Hindu-owned land and complying with the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, numerous incidents of communal violence, particularly targeting the Hindu and Buddhist communities, occurred in the last six months. NGOs, religious leaders and communities attributed the increased violence to political positioning before the January 2014 election through religiously-divisive language by both the ruling Awami League, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and opposing political parties, including the main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the main Islamist Party, Jamaat-e-Islami (Jammat).

Election-related violence

On January 5, 2014, Bangladesh held its parliamentary election, which was not free or fair, with more than half of the parliamentary seats uncontested. The BNP and 18 other political parties boycotted. In the days after the

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election, reportedly 16 out of 64 districts in Bangladesh experienced violence. Most attacks were attributed to individuals and groups associated with the opposition BNP and Jammat. The worst attacks occurred in minority-dominated villages. Dozens of Hindu properties were looted, vandalized, or set ablaze, and hundreds of Hindus fled their homes. Prime Minister Hasina made public statements in support of religious minority communities after the violence, but reports emerged that police and security forces dispatched by the government to affected

areas did not actively stop the violence and in some cases, participated in it.

Blasphemy Charges

In early April 2013, the government arrested and charged three self-professed atheists with “offending religious sensitivities” after they blogged about Bangladesh’s 1971 War Crimes Tribunals. After the close of the reporting period, they were released pending trial. Individuals associated with Jamaat also reportedly gave the government a list naming 84 other individuals they want to see investigated for blasphemy.

Property Returns

In 2011, the Vested Property Return Act established an application process for families or individuals to apply for the return of, or compensation for, Hindu property seized prior to Bangladesh’s independence from Pakistan in 1971. However, many Hindu communities and NGOs believe only a small portion of their properties are eligible for return because the Act is too narrowly defined and the application process too cumbersome and convoluted.

Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord (CHT Accord)

The CHT Accord is a political agreement and peace treaty between the Bangladeshi government and the political party representing the ethnic and indigenous people of the area, of which nearly 50% are followers of Theravada Buddhism. According to information provided to USCIRF by the Bangladeshi government, out of 72 articles of the CHT Accord, 48 have been fully implemented, while another 15 have been implemented partially, and 9 more have yet to be implemented.

Rohingya Muslims

The Bangladeshi government considers Rohingya Muslims as Burmese nationals and therefore considers

them refugees, but does not accord them the treatment required under international law. About 30,000 Rohingyas remain in government-run camps in Cox's Bazaar. While UNHCR and NGOs support these camps, shelter and basic sanitary needs are insufficient. An additional 200,000 to 300,000 Rohingyas live outside the camps in deplorable conditions, and they receive no support from UNHCR.

Recommendations

Since 2012, the United States and Bangladesh have engaged in a Partnership Dialogue. The third Dialogue meeting is scheduled for mid-2014. As the United States engages Bangladesh, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should: urge Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and all government officials to frequently and publically denounce religiously-divisive language and acts of religiously-motivated violence and harassment; provide local government officials, police officers and judges with training on international human rights standards, as well as how to investigate and adjudicated religiously-motivated violent acts; and urge the Bangladeshi government to revoke its blasphemy law.