

BANGLADESH

In 2015, violent extremists killed, threatened, assaulted, harassed, and intimidated religious minorities and self-described atheists or secularist bloggers. While the government, led by the ruling Awami League, has taken steps to investigate, arrest, and prosecute perpetrators of violent attacks or threats, and has increased protection for likely targets, religious and civil society groups fear that increasing religious extremism will result in future threats and attacks. In addition, illegal land appropriations, commonly referred to as land-grabbing, and ownership disputes remain widespread, with religious minorities, especially Hindus and Christians, being particularly vulnerable. Other concerns include the implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord and the situation of Rohingya Muslims. In March 2015, a USCIRF staff member traveled to Bangladesh to assess the religious freedom situation.

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Background

Bangladesh's political landscape is deeply divided between the ruling Awami League and the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The January 2014 parliamentary election was not free and fair, and was followed by violence in 16 out of 64 districts. The worst attacks occurred in minority-dominated villages. Dozens of Hindu properties were looted or set ablaze, and hundreds of Hindus fled their homes. Christian and Buddhist communities also were targeted. Most attacks were attributed to individuals and groups associated with the BNP and the main Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat).

Approximately 90 percent of Bangladesh's estimated 160 million population is Sunni Muslim. Hindus are 9.5

percent of the total population, and all other faiths, including Christians and Buddhists, are less than one percent.

Targeting of Religious Minorities

During the reporting period, religious minority leaders and laity from the Christian, Shi'a Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist communities were killed, injured, or threatened, and some houses of worship were attacked. These incidents were either attributed to or claimed by domestic and international extremist groups, including Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), although the government of Bangladesh denies that ISIL is present and operating in the country. On a positive note, religious minority communities reported that the government and police actively have investigated, arrested, and prosecuted individuals for threats and attacks, and have increased protection, especially during religious holidays and festivals. Religious leaders also noted that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, and religious leaders, including from the Sunni majority, have made public statements condemning attacks against religious minorities. However, religious communities also report that political parties sometimes use religiously-divisive language and act in ways that exacerbate religious and communal tensions for political gain.

Murders of and Threats against Bloggers

In 2015, four Bangladeshis – Washiqur Rahman Babu, Ananta Bijoy Das, Niloy Chatterjee, and Faisal Arefin Dipan – and one Bangladeshi-American, Avijit Roy, were assassinated for their writings on secularism and freedom of thought, religious and communal tolerance, and political transparency and accountability. Groups such as Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Ansar al Islam, and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) claimed responsibility. According to the government, over 30 people have been arrested for the murders of Roy, Bijoy Das, Babu, and

Chatterjee. Additionally, on December 31, 2015, two men were sentenced to death and six others to prison for the 2013 murder of blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider.

Due to threats made against them, including in “Hit Lists” of individuals targeted for assassination widely available on the Internet, dozens of individuals have either fled the country or their areas of residence.

Land-Grabbing

Land-grabbing, including by police and political leaders, is a significant concern and is widespread throughout Bangladesh. Attacks on property holders and arson almost always accompanies incidents of land-grabbing. Religious minorities, particularly Hindus, believe that a lack of political representation makes them especially vulnerable targets. This problem affects all communities, which makes it difficult to determine if minorities are targeted due to their faith, their vulnerable status as minorities, or the value of the property.

In January 2016, hundreds of Christians protested against the government’s attempted seizure of land claimed by the St. Peter’s Church in Barisal district. At the end of the reporting period, the Bangladesh Christian Association’s appeal to stop the seizure remains pending.

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, property seized by the government prior to and immediately after Bangladesh’s independence from Pakistan in 1971. The Hindu community was especially affected by the government’s property seizures. Reportedly, in May 2015, the Act was amended to add an additional six thousand acres of land eligible for return. Reportedly, in consultation with the Hindu community, the government is considering additional amendments to address concerns about the application process and the number of eligible properties for return.

Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord (CHT Accord)

The CHT Accord is a political agreement and peace treaty between the Bangladeshi government and the political organization representing the ethnic and indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts area

in south-eastern Bangladesh, nearly 50 percent of whom follow Theravada Buddhism. Additionally, in recent years the Hindu population has increased from migration. According to the Bangladeshi government, out of 72 articles of the CHT Accord, 48 have been fully implemented, 15 partially implemented, and nine have not been implemented. However, in February 2016, the communities’ political organization asserted that two-thirds of the CHT Accord articles are unimplemented. On a positive note, the representation of ethnic and religious groups in the CHT local police force reportedly has increased.

Rohingya Muslims

For decades, Bangladesh has hosted, in two government-run camps in Cox’s Bazaar, near the Bangladesh-Burmese border, an estimated 30,000 officially-recognized Rohingya Muslim refugees who fled religious persecution in Burma. An estimated 200,000 to 500,000 Rohingya Muslims deemed illegal immigrants live outside the camps, in deplorable conditions. In late 2015, the Bangladesh government began conducting a census of the Rohingya population. Reportedly, participants in the census will receive an identification card from the International Organization for Migration, which will improve access to health care and education.

Recommendations

In its engagement with Bangladesh, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should: provide technical assistance and encourage the Bangladesh government to further develop its national counter terrorism strategy; urge Prime Minister Hasina and all government officials to frequently and publicly denounce religiously-divisive language and acts of religiously-motivated violence and harassment; assist the Bangladeshi government in providing local government officials, police officers and judges with training on international human rights standards, as well as how to investigate and adjudicate religiously-motivated violent acts; and urge the government of Bangladesh to investigate claims of land-grabbing and to repeal its blasphemy law. Additionally, the United States government should provide humanitarian parole for a limited number of Bangladeshi writers at imminent risk of assassination by extremist groups.