

## **OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED: BANGLADESH**

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### **BACKGROUND**

The Commission continues to follow developments in Bangladesh, which was on USCIRF's Watch List from 2005 to 2008. USCIRF removed Bangladesh from the Watch List after the Awami League party, which is considered to promote secular policies and be favorable towards minority rights, won the 2008 general election and promised to implement religious freedom reforms. In the last reporting year, Bangladesh continued to take positive steps in rectifying past religious freedom violations, including the seizure of Hindu-owned land, and to protect vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities from exploitation or violence, especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). However, incidents of communal violence occurred in 2012 and 2013 against Buddhists, Ahmadis, and Hindus.

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 under the Vested Property Act. In 2012, as required by the Act, all districts widely published the properties eligible for return. Additionally, the government established seven tribunals across the country to review and adjudicate return applications. With respect to the CHT Peace Accords, the government has established the Land Commission and the Task Force on Rehabilitation of Jumma Refugees and IDPs (internally displaced persons). It also has reserved over 300 seats for minority students in universities and has been actively recruiting religious and ethnic minority for the Bangladeshi police. These actions demonstrate a governmental effort to resolve long-standing issues relating to IDPs and property confiscation and return.

### **VIOLENCE TARGETING RELIGIOUS MINORITIES**

Regarding communal violence, in September 2012 in Ramu, Cox's Bazaar, 12 Buddhist temples and approximately 50 Buddhist homes were set on fire, after false claims were made that a Buddhist youth defamed Islam and the Qur'an on Facebook. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina condemned the attack, and provided 24.8 million taka (approximately \$315,000 U.S. dollars) in cash aid and building materials. Over 450 individuals were arrested in 19 criminal cases, and a four-member Inquiry Committee was formed to investigate the incident. After the reporting period, in February 2013, a mob described to be over 20,000 Islamic extremists burned down the venue in Dhaka that the Ahmadi community intended to use for their annual convention. It is unknown if any arrests were made. The convention was moved to another venue and occurred without additional incidents.

Also after the close of the reporting period, in late February 2013, the conviction and death sentence by hanging by the country's International War Crimes Tribunal of a Jamaat-e-Islami leader, Delwar Hossain Sayedee, sparked violent attacks against Hindus and their religious temples and shrines, and homes and businesses. Over 80 individuals died, and dozens of temples, shrines, homes and businesses were burned down. The government was slow in responding to violence, and local police allegedly stood by as the violence occurred. The government in early March began to deploy the army to stop the violence, and a few perpetrators of violence were arrested. USCIRF will continue to monitor the situation and the government's response.