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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2011 - Bangladesh

The year 2010 promised much for minorities in Bangladesh, in light of a landmark decision by a Division Bench of the High Court Division of the Supreme Court on 6 May 2010, in a case concerning the forcible eviction of a Hindu community from their land at Mothbariya Pirojpur. In directing that religious communities be rehabilitated and accommodated on the lands from which they had previously been displaced, the judges appeared to be tackling one of the fundamental issues affecting religious minorities and indigenous communities in Bangladesh. Another positive development was the high-profile inclusion of minorities in government, including three non-Muslim men among 38 ministerial positions.

However, aside from these promising signs, minorities continued to face violations of their human rights. The most significant example was the killing of indigenous Jumma in the Chittagong Hill Tracts on 20 February. The killings took place during a strike called by the United People's Democratic Front, a political party representing indigenous Jumma. Amnesty International reported at least two people killed, although it noted that locals spoke of six further deaths. The peaceful protest was called in reaction to the burning of at least 40 houses by majority settlers in the Baghaichhari area of Rangamati district during the night of 19 February. When the protesters refused to move, army personnel opened fire with live ammunition; at least 25 people were injured, Amnesty stated. Afterwards, settlers reportedly burned down at least 160 more houses. Houses were destroyed in 11 villages in Rangamati district; a Buddhist temple was also burned down. Following the incident, security personnel prevented journalists from accessing the site, and vital medical treatment and information was restricted to residents of the villages.

In its annual report, the NGO Odhikar reported 384 incidents of injuries sustained by religious and ethnic minorities, eight deaths, 12 incidents of property seizures ('land-grabbing'), as well as 23 attacks against temples and a further 20 against property owned by minorities. The report also documents 10 cases of rape, one of which occurred on 19 March 2010, when a young Hindu girl was gang-raped in the Patuakhali district. Odhikar also reported at least two Ahmadi communities being attacked by mobs. In Chantara village, a 10-year-old Ahmadi girl was reportedly abducted and sexually assaulted. In February, Bangladesh Minority Watch reported that a Dalit Hindu woman was sexually assaulted by a police officer. The officer in question was suspended from duty, although the report also alleged that the woman was pressured against pursuing the case. This kind of attack appears to be relatively rare, as much of the violence against minorities has been perpetrated by citizens rather than state officials. But the lack of accountability for these crimes and the authorities' reluctance to bring perpetrators to justice highlights a failure on the part of the state in its duty to protect minority groups.

Several attacks on minority religious buildings or property belonging to religious minorities took place over the course of the year. On 21 March 2010, an armed gang attacked, desecrated and destroyed a Hindu temple, destroyed Hindu homes and assaulted their inhabitants in Chandpur district. Bangla-language newspaper *Amar Desh* reported the land-grabbing of Hindu cremation grounds at Zia Nagar in Perojpur District on 21 May. The paper's critique of government policies and its reporting of some of these incidents led to the revocation of its licence, seizure of its property and the arrest of its editor Mahmudur Rahman on 2 June 2010. In contrast, some reports from NGOs suggested that violence against Ahmadiyya diminished during 2010, due to improved police protection for the community.

Several issues continue to pose a challenge to the well-being of minorities in Bangladesh. The first pertains to the extent to which the authorities can guarantee minorities' physical security. A failure to react to the rise in attacks against communities and their property will engender a culture of impunity in the state. Many commentators claim that this has already become ingrained through the activities of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a paramilitary unit

composed of some 4,500 military and police personnel formed in 2004 to combat widespread lawlessness. The second issue is the secular nature of the state, something the Supreme Court has sought to achieve in its judgments, and that the legislature has sought to instil through increased participation of minorities and greater freedoms in education. However, the impact of these measures is limited without society-wide consensus in regard to such policies. Finally, it is 13 years since the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord, but the failure to implement its provisions means that tensions continue in the region. The failure to pay adequate attention to the situation of the economic and social rights of indigenous women, highlighted at a high-profile conference held in Dhaka on 23 November, means that indigenous communities are victim to continued discrimination and deprivation.

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