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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2015 - Human Rights Priority Country update report: July to December 2016 - People's Republic of Bangladesh

There was no improvement in the human rights situation in Bangladesh in the second half of 2016. Attacks on minority groups continued and the government's response to extremist violence resulted in allegations of suspicious deaths and enforced disappearances. Concerns about restrictions on freedom of expression and the treatment of women and girls also continued and the death penalty remained a legal punishment for a range of offences.

There were a number of terrorist attacks in the second half of 2016 including at the Holey Bakery restaurant in Dhaka's diplomatic zone on 1 July, in which 22 people died. Days later, the Sholakia Eid Congregation was also targeted and there were a number of separate attacks on Hindus. Daesh claimed responsibility for all of these attacks.

The Bangladeshi government response was characterised by mass arrests, allegations of "crossfire" deaths and enforced disappearances by law enforcement agencies and a lack of transparency in investigations. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported allegations of law enforcers inflicting life-changing injuries on members and supporters of opposition parties.

While the UK welcomes the Bangladesh government's zero-tolerance approach to terrorism and is clear that those who commit criminal acts should be brought to justice, we remind the Bangladeshi authorities that investigations must be conducted transparently and impartially, irrespective of the individual circumstances of either the victim, or alleged perpetrator. Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Minister of State, Baroness Anelay discussed the need to ensure that anyone arrested is treated in full accordance with Bangladeshi law and international standards with Bangladesh's Foreign Minister, when they met in October 2016. The High Commissioner regularly raised these issues with the government of Bangladesh.

In an address to Hindu devotees in October, Prime Minister Hasina underlined that the Bangladesh constitution guarantees equal rights for people of all faiths irrespective of colour, creed or gender. While we welcome the government's recent efforts to promote harmony and religious tolerance, these are yet to deliver tangible results and 2016 saw a number of attacks against minority religious groups. On 30 October, prompted by an apparent fake Facebook post allegedly defaming Islam, a large number of Hindu homes and temples were attacked in Brahmanbaria. There were reports of similar attacks in other Hindu communities in Bangladesh where many homes were destroyed and temples desecrated.

In November, there were attacks against the Santal community in the northwest of Bangladesh, with many people evicted under duress from their homes in an alleged land grab. Towards the end of 2016, a video appeared on social media which implicated local law enforcement agencies. The investigations launched by the government of Bangladesh into both the Hindu and Santal attacks were welcome and it is important that those responsible are held to account. In his Adjournment Debate speech in the House of Commons on 8 September, FCO Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State Alok Sharma MP, urged the government of Bangladesh “to make clear that they will uphold and protect the fundamental rights of all their citizens”.

In October, HRW called for the Bangladesh authorities to release 3 adult children of opposition leaders. HRW report that Humam Chowdhury, Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem and Amaan Azmi were illegally detained in August and that none of the men has since been put before a magistrate nor allowed access to family or a lawyer.

NGOs called for the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Bill 2016 to be repealed after it was passed by Parliament on 5 October. While efforts to speed up the implementation of development projects and reduce bureaucracy are welcome, there are concerns that the Bill could put pressure on freedom of expression and hamper the ability of NGOs and aid agencies to deliver vital programmes.

Despite impressive progress towards gender equality, Bangladesh continued to score poorly against UN gender indices. Rates of violence against women and girls were particularly high, with a [2015 report](#) finding that around 80% of currently-married Bangladeshi women experienced abuse at least once during their marriage. Over 350 alleged rapes, including of a 5-year-old girl, were documented by human rights organisations in the past 6 months.

While rates of child marriage have declined over the past 10 years, almost one in 5 girls are married before their 15th birthday in Bangladesh. In November, the Cabinet endorsed the draft Child Marriage Restraint Act 2016, which maintained the minimum age of marriage at 18 and included tougher sanctions to improve enforcement. Enactment of this legislation will be an important step towards protecting the rights of millions of Bangladeshi girls. However, NGOs and civil society expressed concern that the draft Act contained a provision that declared that a marriage would not be considered illegal if, in special circumstances, the court and parents consent that it is in the best interests of a minor girl. Along with like-minded partners, we continued to discuss our concerns regarding the Act with the government of Bangladesh, with the aim of ensuring that the public commitments to end child marriage made by Prime Minister Hasina at the Girl Summit in 2014 are maintained. We also pressed for improved implementation of policies that protect and promote the status and empowerment of women and girls. The High Commissioner joined fellow Heads of Mission to deliver messages to enhance the status of women and girls in Bangladesh during the UN's 16 Days of Activism to end Violence against Women and Girls in November.

In October, as a result of violence and attacks on security forces in Burma's northern Rakhine region, the Burmese military launched a security operation to find the perpetrators and retrieve the weapons taken during the attacks. The UN estimated that 65,000 Rohingya subsequently fled to Bangladesh. Those crossing the border were mainly women and children, some were visibly injured and others alleged sexual violence. During a meeting with the Bangladeshi High Commissioner to the United Kingdom in December, FCO Minister, Alok Sharma MP welcomed the existing humanitarian support provided to the Rohingya in Bangladesh and urged the government of

Bangladesh not to return people into danger. The UK is the largest provider of food aid to the 34,000 Rohingya refugees already living in the official camps in Bangladesh. In addition, since 2014 the UK has provided nearly £8 million to address the humanitarian suffering of Rohingya refugees and the vulnerable Bangladeshi communities that host them.

The death penalty remained a legal punishment for a wide range of offences and executions were carried out on at least 4 occasions. These included Asadul Islam Arif, a convicted militant involved in a 2006 bomb attack that killed a District Judge and Jamaat leader Mir Quasem Ali who was executed for war crimes committed during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. The UK has been clear with the government of Bangladesh that we oppose the death penalty in all circumstances. The FCO's Magna Carta Fund is supporting a project to help draw up clear sentencing guidelines for judges to help ensure that where the death penalty is retained it is applied in a way that meets international standards.

A new Chairman and members of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) were appointed in August. We encouraged the NHRC and the government of Bangladesh to work towards full compliance with the 1993 Paris Principles on the role and independence of National Human Rights Institutions.

Looking ahead, we encourage all political parties to work towards achieving free, fair and participatory elections by positively engaging in the process to appoint an independent Election Commission that is supported by all parties; a key component for credible and peaceful elections. We want Bangladesh to continue its economic and development successes and to maintain its rich tradition of accepting people of all backgrounds and cultures, and all regions and beliefs.