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Country Report on Terrorism 2019 - Chapter 1 - Bangladesh

Overview: Bangladesh experienced a small increase in terrorist activity in 2019. ISIS claimed six IED attacks, five of which were directed at Bangladesh police. ISIS's At-Tamkin media outlet released a Bangla-language propaganda video outlining its campaign against the Bangladesh government and other declared enemies. As in prior years, the Bangladesh government denied that Bangladesh-based terrorists have meaningful ties to transnational terror groups, including ISIS or AQIS. In November, the Bangladesh government formally granted operational authority to a national Antiterrorism Unit. Also in November, the CT Special Tribunal in Dhaka sentenced seven individuals to death for their supporting roles in the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack, in which attackers claiming allegiance to ISIS killed 20 people, including one American. However, ongoing deficits in Bangladesh's judicial system contribute to a decade-long backlog of terrorism cases and a conviction rate estimated at less than 15 percent. The Bangladesh government continued to articulate a “zero tolerance” policy toward terrorism and the use of its territory as a terrorist safe haven. In December, the Bangladesh government, in concert with the U.S. Embassy, the UN, and other partners, hosted its inaugural National CVE Conference aimed at producing a national CVE strategy.

2019 Terrorist Incidents: From April to November, Bangladeshi militants detonated six IEDs. Five were directed against the Bangladesh police, while one detonated at an Awami League office in Khulna. ISIS claimed responsibility for these attacks, which caused several injuries but no deaths.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: In 2019, Bangladesh's criminal justice system was still in the process of fully implementing the Antiterrorism Act of 2009 as amended in 2012 and 2013. A CT Special Tribunal authorized under the Act sentenced seven men to death for their supporting roles in the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack. Although Bangladesh's Antiterrorism Act does not outlaw recruitment and travel in the furtherance of terrorism, the broad language of the Act provides several mechanisms by which Bangladesh can implement UNSCR 2396 on addressing FTFs. Despite lacking laws specific to FTFs, Bangladesh arrested suspected FTFs or facilitators of such fighters on other charges under existing law.

Bangladesh cooperated with the United States to strengthen control of its borders and ports of entry. The international community remains concerned about security procedures at Dhaka's Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. In February, a man attempted to hijack a passenger aircraft in flight, having smuggled what authorities reported was a fake gun onto the aircraft. There were several subsequent incidents in which passengers defeated screening protocols. U.S.-trained explosive detection K9 teams are available to patrol Dhaka's international airport but are not a permanent presence. Bangladesh shared law enforcement information with INTERPOL but does not have a dedicated terrorist watchlist, though the United States and Bangladesh are collaborating on the development of a national level Alert List of known or suspected terrorists. Bangladesh also does not systematically review or analyze API/PNR.

Elements of the Bangladesh Police continued a campaign of arrests and raids against suspected militants. Many suspects died in these operations, sometimes described as the result of “shootouts” or “crossfire” – often euphemisms for extrajudicial killings. Observers questioned the veracity and significance of some of the reported CT operations, describing them as either staged by law enforcement or inaccurately portrayed by the media.

In August, ISIS's At-Tamkin media outlet released a Bangla-language video directed against the Bangladesh government, as well as foreign governments, religious minorities, and other alleged enemies of Islam. In September, Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime Unit arrested several individuals who allegedly produced the video.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: Bangladesh is a member and current co-chair of the APG. The Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit is a member of the Egmont Group. There were no significant updates in 2019.

Countering Violent Extremism: Bangladeshi organizations continued cooperative activities through the Country Support Mechanism under GCERF, a public-private global fund to support local, grassroots CVE efforts in at-risk communities. The Ministry of Religious Affairs and the National Committee on Militancy, Resistance, and Prevention work with imams and religious scholars to build public awareness against terrorism. The police engaged religious leaders to counter terrorist propaganda with scripture-based messages and engaged imams to speak to surrendered militants to explain that the Quran does not support terrorist violence. They also continued community policing efforts. Law enforcement authorities worked with local universities to identify missing students and curb terrorist radicalization among university students. Local research institutions, including private think tanks and both public and private universities, continued to engage in CVE-related research. In December, the Counterterrorism and Transnational Crime Unit partnered with the U.S. Embassy, the UN, and various CSOs to draft a national CVE strategy for submission to the Bangladesh government.

The Bangladeshi cities of Dhaka North, Dhaka South, and Narayanganj are members of the SCN.

International and Regional Cooperation: There were no changes in 2019.

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