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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Bangladesh

Executive Summary

The constitution designates Islam as the state religion but upholds the principle of secularism. It prohibits religious discrimination and provides for equality for all religions. Family law, enforced in secular courts, contains separate provisions for different religious groups.

In March, Ahmadi Muslim leaders said law enforcement and government officials stood by as hundreds of persons attacked the Ahmadi community during its annual convention in Ahmednagar. The violence resulted in two deaths, dozens of injuries, and the looting and destruction of hundreds of Ahmadi houses, one Ahmadi mosque and an Ahmadi medical clinic. In the aftermath, police filed cases against thousands of unnamed individuals and arrested more than 200, including the alleged instigators of the violence. Leaders of religious minority communities continued to say the government frequently used laws such as the Digital Security Act (DSA) to target members of religious minority groups, particularly Hindus, for “hurting the religious sentiments” of Muslim populations. In almost all cases, courts took harsher measures against members of religious minorities for posting allegedly derogatory content on Facebook than against the perpetrators of retaliatory violence. Several cases followed this pattern during the year.

Muslim leaders said the government continued to influence the appointment and removal of imams and provide guidance on the content of sermons to imams throughout the country. In September, the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC) announced a hunger strike to demand implementation of past election pledges to implement a law allowing citizens (mostly Hindu) to recover property seized by the government following independence, form a national minority commission, enact a special law for the safety of religious minority communities, and reinstate the government employment quota system for members of religious minorities.

In April, a Muslim scholar and three village elders faced charges after issuing a fatwa ordering a woman accused of an extramarital affair to be caned and stoned. The scholar and elders violated laws prohibiting local religious leaders from settling matters of religious practice and prohibiting fatwas from being invoked to justify meting out punishment. One organization which monitors incidents across the country stated there were 22 incidents of violence against religious minorities from January to December in which one Ahmadi Muslim was killed and 62 Ahmadis and 19 Hindus injured. Human rights NGOs and some religious leaders continued to report harassment and social isolation of, and physical violence against, converts to Christianity from Islam and Hinduism.

The Ambassador and U.S. embassy officials engaged throughout the year with host government officials to express concern over violence against the Ahmadi community and other religious minorities and the use of the DSA against members of religious minority communities. The Ambassador also met with leaders of major religious communities to encourage interfaith harmony and hosted events during which he stressed the importance of respect for religious diversity. The embassy continued public outreach programs and used social media to encourage interfaith tolerance. Embassy officials met with a wide range of religious organizations and representatives to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country, underscore the importance of religious tolerance, and identify challenges encountered by religious minorities. The United States provided nearly 247 million dollars of humanitarian assistance to fund programs assisting Rohingya refugees from Burma (who are overwhelmingly Muslim) and their local host communities.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 167.2 million (mid-year 2023). According to the 2022 national government census, Sunni Muslims constitute approximately 91 percent of the population and Hindus approximately 8 percent. The remainder of the population includes Christians, with approximately 400,000 Roman Catholics, approximately one million Theravada-Hinayana Buddhists and small numbers of Shia Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, animists, International Society for Krishna Consciousness members, agnostics, and atheists.

Ethnic minorities concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and northern districts generally practice non-Islamic faiths. The Garo in Mymensingh are predominantly Christian, as are some of the Santal in Gaibandha. Most Buddhists are members of the indigenous populations of the CHT. Bengali and ethnic minority Christians live in communities across the country, with relatively high concentrations in Barishal City and Gournadi in Barishal District, Baniarchar in Gopalganj District, Monipuripara and Christianpara in Dhaka City, and in the cities of Gazipur and Khulna.

The largest noncitizen population is Rohingya. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, since 2017, approximately 774,000 Rohingya fleeing genocide in Burma have taken refuge in the country, bringing the total to more than 965,000; most live in and around the refugee settlements of Kutupalong and Nayapara in the Cox's Bazar District. The great majority of Rohingya are Muslims. The NGO Human Rights Watch estimates approximately 1,500 Rohingya in the refugee settlements are Christians, although some Christian leaders estimate the total number may be closer to 2,500-3,000. UNHCR estimates approximately 600 refugees are registered as Hindu.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

According to the constitution, "The state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and other religions." The constitution stipulates the state should not grant political status in favor of any religion and bans religiously based political parties. It provides for the right to profess, practice, or propagate all religions "subject to law, public order, and morality" and states religious communities or denominations have the right to establish, maintain, and manage their religious institutions. The constitution states no one attending any educational institution shall be required to receive instruction in, or participate in ceremonies or worship pertaining to, a religion to which he or she does not belong.

Under the penal code, statements or acts made with a "deliberate and malicious" intent to insult religious sentiments are subject to fines or up to two years in prison. Although the code does not further define this prohibited intent, the courts have interpreted it to include insulting the Prophet Muhammad. The criminal code allows the government to confiscate all copies of any newspaper, magazine, or other publications containing language that "creates enmity and hatred among the citizens or denigrates religious beliefs." The law applies similar restrictions to online publications. While there is no specific blasphemy law, authorities use the penal code, as well as a section of the Information and Communication Technology Act and DSA to charge individuals for acts perceived to be a slight to Islam. The Information and Communication Technology Act criminalizes several forms of online expression, including "obscene material," "expression(s) likely to cause deterioration of law and order," and "statements hurting religious sentiments." The DSA

continues to criminalize publication or broadcast of “any information that hurts religious values or sentiments.”

The constitution prohibits freedom of association if an association is formed for the purpose of “destroying the religious, social, and communal harmony among the citizens,” or creating discrimination on religious grounds.

Individual houses of worship are not required to register with the government. Religious groups seeking to form associations with multiple houses of worship, however, must register as NGOs with either the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) under the Prime Minister’s office if they receive foreign assistance for development projects, or with the Ministry of Social Welfare if they do not. The law requires the NGOAB to approve and monitor all foreign-funded projects. The NGOAB Director General has the authority to impose sanctions on NGOs for violating the law, including fines of up to three times the amount of the foreign donation, or closure of the NGO. NGOs are also subject to penalties for “derogatory” comments about the constitution or constitutional institutions (i.e., the government). Expatriate staff must receive a security clearance from the National Security Intelligence, the Special Branch of Police, and Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, but the standards for these clearances are not specified.

Registration requirements and procedures for religious groups are the same as for secular associations. Groups that register with the Ministry of Social Welfare must certify that the name being registered is not already taken. Groups must also provide the bylaws/constitution of the organization; confirmation of security clearances for leaders of the organization from the National Security Intelligence; minutes of the meeting appointing the executive committee; a list of all executive committee and general members and photographs of principal officers; a work plan; a copy of the deed or lease of the organization’s office and a list of property owned; a budget; and a recommendation by a local government representative. Requirements for religious groups that register with the NGOAB are similar.

Family law concerning marriage, divorce, and adoption contains separate provisions for Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. These laws are enforced in the secular courts that apply to each religion. A separate civil family law applies to mixed-faith families or those of other faiths or no faith. The family laws of the religions of the two parties concerned govern their marriage rituals and proceedings. A Muslim man may have as many as four wives, although he must obtain the written consent of his existing wife or wives before marrying again. Hindu men may also have multiple wives, while a Christian man may marry only one woman.

Officially, Hindus have no options for divorce, although informal divorces do occur. Hindu women may not inherit property under family law. Divorced Hindus and Buddhists may not legally remarry, although informal remarriages that afford no legal rights and protections occur for people of these faiths. Divorced and widowed men and women of religions other than Hinduism or Buddhism may remarry. Marriage between members of different religious groups occurs only under civil law. To be legally recognized, Muslim marriages must be registered with the state by either the couple or the cleric performing the marriage; however, some Muslim marriages are not registered. Registration with the state of marriages for Hindus and Christians is optional and rare, and other faiths may determine their own guidelines.

Under the Muslim family ordinance, a Muslim man may marry women of any Abrahamic faith; however, a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim. Under the ordinance, a widow receives one-eighth of her husband’s estate if she is his only wife, and the remainder is divided among the children; each female child receives half the share of each male child. Wives have fewer divorce rights than their Muslim husbands. For example, in most cases, a woman may only seek a divorce if the right to do so was included in the couple’s marriage contract, known as a *nikah nama*, or in limited cases through court intervention. A Muslim man always retains the right to initiate a divorce. Civil courts must approve divorces. The law requires a Muslim man to pay a former wife three months of alimony, but these protections generally apply only to registered marriages; unregistered marriages are by definition undocumented and difficult to substantiate. Authorities do not always enforce the alimony requirement even in cases involving registered marriages.

Alternative dispute resolution is available to all citizens for settling out of court family arguments and other civil matters not related to land ownership. With the consent of both parties, lawyers, court officials, or community leaders may be identified to facilitate the arbitration, the results of which may be used in court.

Fatwas may be issued only by Muslim religious scholars, and not by local religious leaders, to settle matters of religious practice. Fatwas may not be invoked to justify meting out punishment, nor may they supersede existing secular law.

Religious studies are compulsory and part of the curriculum for grades three through 10 in all public and government-accredited schools. Private schools do not have this requirement. Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian students receive instruction in their own religious beliefs, although teachers are not always adherents of the students' faith. According to the representative of the Holy See in Bangladesh, the Catholic Church is the second largest provider of education after the government, with approximately 270 schools.

The code regulating prisons allows for observance of religious commemorations by prisoners, including access to extra food on certain national and religious holidays – such as Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Independence Day – or permission to fast for religious reasons. The law does not provide for prisoners to have regular access to clergy or regular religious services, but prison authorities may arrange special religious programs for them. Prison authorities are required to provide prisoners facing the death penalty access to a religious figure from a faith of their choice before execution.

The law allows the government to return property confiscated from individuals, mostly Hindus, whom it formerly declared enemies of the state. In the past, authorities used The Restoration of Vested Property Act to seize property abandoned by members of minority religious groups who fled the country, particularly following the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War.

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), created as an independent institution by legislation in 2009 and with members appointed by the government, monitors human rights in the country, including those related to religion.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

On March 3-4, according to media reports and Ahmadi Muslim leaders, law enforcement and government officials stood by as hundreds of persons attacked the Ahmadi community during its annual convention in Ahmednagar, Panchagarh District. Media said most of the violence began after Friday prayers and increased on Saturday after a local mosque broadcast rumors about the deaths of anti-Ahmadi activists. Two individuals were killed in the clashes, including one Ahmadi, and dozens injured, including Ahmadis and policemen, according to media and NGOs. An Ahmadi spokesman identified one of those killed as Zahid Hasan, a security guard for the Ahmadi Muslim event. A spokesman for the International Human Rights Committee (IHRC) said that police and local authorities should have been better prepared given smaller-scale looting and violence that began in the area on March 2 in protest of the convention that was to begin the next day. The crowds also looted and/or destroyed hundreds of Ahmadi houses in five villages, the media reported, citing local Ahmadi leaders and eyewitnesses. The IHRC said that one Ahmadi mosque and an Ahmadi health clinic were also destroyed. The government said the Border Guard Bangladesh and the Rapid Action Battalion responded to quell the violence but were overwhelmed by the crowds. Ahmadi leaders said, however, that the district administration and police let the attack happen, with police and other security forces present but reluctant to come to victims' aid despite promises to protect the Ahmadis from what authorities termed Islamist extremists.

The attack continued for hours, according to media reports, and only subsided when the Ahmadi Muslim convention was postponed. Police filed cases against more than 8,000 individuals and arrested more than 80 others, according to the district police superintendent on March 7. A police leader told the media that the violence against the Ahmadis was “pre-planned.” By May, police said 260 individuals had been arrested in connection with the violence, including those who initiated the incident, who were identified using video and closed-circuit television footage and intelligence sources. On March 15, local authorities distributed 10,000,000 taka (\$88,500) in humanitarian aid to the affected Ahmadi Muslim families, provided by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. On May 24, a visiting international team from the IHRC met with local officials and Ahmadi leaders.

The government continued to deploy law enforcement personnel at other religious sites, festivals, and events considered potential targets for violence, including during Durga Puja, Diwali, Christmas, Easter, and the Buddhist festival of Buddha Purnima.

Hindu leaders continued to criticize the government for failing to adequately punish the perpetrators of anti-Hindu communal violence during Durga Puja celebrations in 2021. They noted, however, that the government took steps such as deploying additional law enforcement resources and organizing interreligious dialogue workshops to encourage religious harmony ahead of the 2023 Durga Puja celebrations in October. There were no reports of communal violence during those celebrations. By year’s end, police had completed their investigation into 141 of the 142 cases opened following the 2021 violence. Hindu leaders said they did not expect all the temples destroyed in that violence to be fully reconstructed.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

Leaders of religious minority communities continued to say laws such as the DSA were used to target members of religious minority groups, particularly Hindus, for “hurting the religious sentiments” of Muslim populations. In almost all cases, courts took harsher measures against members of religious minorities for posting allegedly derogatory information on Facebook than against the perpetrators of retaliatory violence.

For example, in February, a judge sentenced Poritosh Sarkar, a Hindu teen, to five years in prison in a DSA case filed against him for a social media post he made in 2021 that police said sparked communal violence in Rangpur district. He was charged under the provision in the DSA that criminalizes publication of anything that “creates enmity, hatred or hostility among different classes or communities of the society or destroys communal harmony.” Local Muslims filed the case saying he made a derogatory social media post that hurt religious sentiment. In response to the post, a local mob set fire to a fishing village, razing homes inhabited by Hindus. Authorities kept the teen in solitary confinement for eight months of pretrial detention, although there is no provision in the criminal code to do so, before releasing him in 2022 after his third request for bail. Prison authorities told the teen’s family he was being kept in solitary confinement “for his safety.” Police arrested 74 persons following the 2021 arson and communal violence in Rangpur, but all were released on bail at various times during 2023 and none were convicted.

In March, a court sentenced 13 persons to four years in prison each for setting fire to a Hindu temple in 2016. According to the case statements, vandals burned the temple after a rumor spread of an allegedly derogatory Facebook post on Islam.

In May, a court sentenced Titu Ray to 10 years in prison for demeaning Islam and the Prophet Muhammad in a 2017 Facebook post. The post sparked vandalism and arson of several houses and temples in a Hindu village, and conflict between rioters and police, in which one rioter was killed and 20 persons, including 15 police, were injured. No charges were filed against those who participated in the violence. Ray’s attorney said he would appeal.

Also in May, a court sentenced a female student to two years and seven months (time served) in a DSA case. Police arrested her in 2020 when, as a student at the Begum Badrunnesa Government

Girls' College, she allegedly made derogatory remarks against the Prophet Muhammad in a Facebook post. Media reported that at the sentencing hearing, she pled guilty and apologized for what she said was her mistake.

In October, a court granted a senior leader of Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam bail in five cases filed against him, related to inciting violence during that group's protests against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the country in 2021. The group had stated then that Modi stoked religious discrimination against Muslims in India.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

March 27, police detained 17 persons from a Quran teaching center in the Gulshan area of Dhaka as they engaged in regular night-time prayers during Ramadan. Media reported that four additional Muslims were later arrested, including family members who were bringing supplies to the detainees. Police said the detainees, which included women and children, belonged to the Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami and were seeking to attack the government. The acting Secretary-General of Jamaat-e-Islami said that police claims to have also recovered explosives (Molotov cocktails) from the residences of some of the detainees were "ridiculous."

Thousands of mosques, including the Baitul Mukarram National Mosque in Dhaka, continued to operate under the direct authority of the Islamic Foundation, an entity administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs; the government funded imams and employees of those mosques. Mosques not overseen by the Islamic Foundation still operated with oversight from a governing committee that was dominated by local ruling party politicians and administrations. The government influenced the appointment and removal of imams and provided guidance on the content of sermons to imams throughout the country. The government issued written instructions highlighting certain Quranic verses and quotations of the Prophet Muhammad for imams to use. The government also instructed imams to denounce extremism. Religious community leaders said imams in all mosques usually continued the practice of avoiding sermons that contradicted government policy.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs budget was 25.09 billion taka (\$222 million) for the 2023-24 fiscal year, compared with 23.53 billion taka (\$204 million) the previous fiscal year. The budget included 21.76 billion taka (\$192.5 million) allocated to the Islamic Foundation and the Hindu, Buddhist and Christian Welfare Trusts for local community development projects and administrative expenses. The government provided the Islamic Foundation 23.22 billion taka (\$205.4 million), compared with 18.17 billion taka (\$160.7 million) the previous fiscal year. The Hindu Welfare Trust received 1.38 billion taka (\$12.2 million), compared with 668.9 million taka (\$5.9 million) in the previous fiscal year. The Buddhist Welfare Trust received 74.9 million taka (\$663,000), compared to 18.3 million taka (\$162,000) the previous fiscal year. The Christian Welfare Trust received 13.7 million taka (\$121,200), compared to 13 million taka (\$115,000) the previous fiscal year. These allocations varied year-to-year depending on the number and size of the development projects underway.

During a press conference in June, the BHBCUC stated the allocation for religious minorities in the proposed national budget was clear proof of "disregard, neglect, and discrimination" toward the communities because of the larger share going to the Islamic Foundation. In a statement, the BHBCUC general secretary said funding for the welfare of religious minority communities amounted to only 6.4 percent of the Ministry of Religious Affairs' budget, and depended on interest earned from accounts, instead of direct funding from the government, which led to a smaller and variable income stream.

In the press conference, the BHBCUC demanded that the government allocate funding from the national budget for the development and welfare of religious minority communities; enact a law to protect and develop the interests of religious and ethnic minority communities; establish a ministry for minority affairs and a national minority commission; ensure an accurate representation of religious and ethnic minority communities in the national census; establish model temples, pagodas,

churches, and cultural centers in every district and *upazila* (sub-district); allocate 50 billion taka (\$442.4 million) to compensate for discrimination against minority religious groups in the budget over the last five decades; and provide national pay scale salaries for teachers and employees working under the Bangladesh Sanskrit and Palli Education Board, which provides teachers and staff for Buddhist and Hindu schools.

In October, two individuals were arrested, and the BHBCUC sued 500 individuals, for carrying out an attack on members of the BHBCUC who were participating in an organized protest in Cumilla. The BHBCUC said they had organized their event to protest what they said were remarks offensive to the Hindu community by Awami League local leaders, an attack on a Hindu poet in Kurigram, and vandalism of temples in Cumilla during Durga Puja in 2021. Those arrested and sued were members of the ruling Awami League political party student and youth leagues, according to media reports.

At a press conference in Dhaka on June 19, a Dhaka-based women's organization urged the government to make National Identity Card photographs optional for Muslim women who choose to wear veils. The group said denying ID cards to women who declined to remove their veils violated their human rights. The group called for fingerprints or iris scans to be used to verify identity, and if authorities needed to see under a woman's veil, to do so using female officers in a private setting. A National Identity Card is required to obtain a driver's license or passport, to buy and sell property, and to open a bank account.

In August, the Prime Minister announced the government allocated more than 15 billion taka (\$132.7 million) in the budget to pursue a mosque-based and mass education program for children that would "publicize Islamic brotherhood," teach that the essence of Islam was against extremism and militancy, and discourage terrorism, and violence against women. She said, "We want Islamic scholars' cooperation to prevent superstition, militancy and terrorism."

Religious minorities continued to state religious minority students sometimes were unable to enroll in mandatory religion classes because of an insufficient number of teachers for students of non-Islamic faiths. In these cases, school officials generally allowed local religious institutions, parents, or others to hold religious studies classes for such students outside school hours and sometimes exempted students from the religious education requirement.

Construction of an evangelical Christian church in Tangail District had not resumed, after it was halted by local ruling party officials in 2022. A local source reported that government officials did not respond to requests for assistance, that construction materials at the work site were stolen, and that the local Muslim community warned the Christians not to resume construction. The small Christian community there remained without a church.

Minority rights groups again stated the government made little progress on land restitution cases during the year, although they also said that recent information for all cases was not available. The Ministry of Land did not update the public compendium of cases filed under the Restoration of Vested Property Act, which was last revised in 2019. Media reports and human rights activists attributed the slow return of land seized from Hindus who had left for India to judicial inefficiency and general government indifference.

Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and members of other minority religious communities, who were also sometimes members of ethnic minority groups, continued to report property and land ownership disputes and forced eviction cases, including some involving the government, that remained unresolved at year's end. Some human rights activists said it was often difficult to determine whether these disputes and evictions were the result of deliberate government discrimination against religious minorities or of government inefficiency. The government continued tourism-related construction projects in areas traditionally owned by Indigenous communities in Moulvibazar and the Madhupur Forest. In June, members of the ethnic Garo community, who are mostly Christian, protested against a government plan to create an artificial lake in the Madhupur Forest area, noting the serious environmental and socioeconomic impact on approximately 25,000 individuals there.

According to minority religious associations, land disputes continued to occur in areas near new roads or industrial development zones, where land prices had increased. They also stated local police, civil authorities, and political leaders continued to enable property appropriations for financial gain or shielded politically influential property appropriators from prosecution. Some human rights groups attributed the lack of resolution of some of these disputes to ineffective judicial and land registry systems and the targeted communities' insufficient political and financial clout, rather than to government policy disfavoring religious or ethnic minorities. Indigenous groups in the CHT in particular have large communities of Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians. Some of the communities only speak tribal languages, making it difficult for them to access government services and further marginalizing them.

Throughout the year, the Prime Minister inaugurated hundreds of model mosques and Islamic cultural centers across the country as part of a plan to construct a total of 564 new mosques and education centers by 2024. Media reported that 250 had been opened by July. The government said the facilities will include training centers for imams, Islamic research centers and libraries, and boarding facilities. The facilities will offer Islamic preschool education, assistance for Hajj pilgrims, and other services. The Prime Minister said the government also had created the Imam and Muajjin Welfare Trust to provide financial assistance to insolvent imams and muajjins (muezzins) who offer the daily call to prayer.

Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2023 Report* on the country assessed that religious, ethnic, and other marginalized groups remained underrepresented in politics and state agencies.

In May, the High Court asked the government to explain why the deprivation of Hindu women's rights regarding divorce, guardianship, and equal property inheritance should not be considered illegal. The lawyer for the petitioners who brought the challenge to the Court said that Hindu women were being deprived of many rights despite the constitution's guarantee of equal rights irrespective of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Other Hindu activists and Hindu women's groups in the country continued their campaign to reform Hindu family law to allow Hindu women greater rights.

In September, the BHBCUC announced it would hold hunger strikes and sit-ins around the country to demand that the ruling Awami League honor its election pledges from 2018. These included implementing the Vested Property Return Act, which would enable (mostly Hindu) citizens to recover property seized by the government following independence; reinstating the government employment quota system for members of religious minority communities; and as the BHBCUC had also called for in June, forming a national minority commission and enacting a special law for the safety of religious minority communities. In response, the government announced that it would create a national minority commission by October and take steps to fulfill its other 2018 election promises. The government took no further action on these issues before the end of the year.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

More than 122,000 Bangladeshis performed Hajj in June, according to media reports and government estimates. Although most of the pilgrims' travel was facilitated by private Hajj agencies, the Ministry of Religious Affairs oversaw the process. The government signed a bilateral agreement with the Government of Saudi Arabia in January to determine the number of Bangladeshi pilgrims, set prices for the Hajj travel packages, provide orientation to the pilgrims at a government facility prior to departure, and regulate the private Hajj agencies. Local media noted the high cost of Hajj packages and airfare, including for travel on the national airline, Biman Bangladesh, which charged much higher airfare for Hajj flights than other airlines in the region. The airline said higher taxes, exchange rate fluctuations, and skyrocketing fuel prices were the reasons for the increase. Facing criticism, in March, the Ministry of Religious Affairs directed the airline to reduce the fare; the airline said it could not do so for the 2023 Hajj. According to

media reports, a typical pilgrim spent approximately \$6,300 to perform Hajj, up from approximately \$1,450 the previous year, mostly because of exchange rate fluctuations and the high cost of flights.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In January in Kotalipara, Gopalganj District, a mob attacked the house of a Hindu man in response to a Facebook post of his which they said they believed demeaned the Prophet Muhammad. Family members living in the house told the media they did not know what the Facebook post said, and that a crowd of 400-500 individuals attacked their home. Local police deployed to the community but said they would not take further action against the perpetrators of the attack in absence of an officially filed complaint about the attack. The local officer in charge said police could not take legal action on behalf of the man, anyway, because he was living in India, according to his family.

In April, a Muslim scholar and three village elders faced charges after ordering a woman accused of an extramarital affair to be caned and stoned. A local imam issued a fatwa, under which the woman was caned 82 times and hit by stones 80 times, according to media reports. The woman survived and filed criminal charges against 17 individuals under legislation that outlines punishments for sexual oppression and other sexual violence crimes; police arrested the scholar and the elders. The fatwa triggered an outcry by feminist groups and human rights activists, who called for the perpetrators' prosecution. Under the law, fatwas may not be issued by local religious leaders to settle matters of religious practice and fatwas may not be invoked to justify meting out punishment. Despite that prohibition, local human rights organization Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) reported five incidents of village community leaders and local religious leaders using extrajudicial fatwas to punish individuals for perceived "moral transgressions" from January to August.

In July, unidentified individuals attacked and stabbed an 86-year-old Buddhist monk in his house in Cox's Bazar, according to media reports. The victim died in the hospital. Although there were conflicting accounts of the incident, the monk's son said his father may have been attacked because he was carrying money from the temple. Police opened an investigation.

ASK, which monitors incidents across the country, stated there were 22 incidents of violence against religious minorities from January to December. Two people were killed (including one Ahmadi) and 81 injured (62 Ahmadi and 19 Hindus) in the incidents. There were attacks on 103 Ahmadi homes, 33 Ahmadi business, one Ahmadi mosque, one Ahmadi health clinic, and six Hindu temples, five Hindu homes, one Hindu business, and 43 Hindu statues. The NGO did not publish specific details about each incident. From January-December 2022, ASK reported 12 incidents of violence against religious minorities, which injured five Hindus and damaged one Hindu home, eight Hindu businesses, four Hindu temples and 11 statues. ASK reported no Ahmadi casualties in 2022. According to media analysis, the uptick in general political violence in advance of the January 2024 national elections likely accounted for the increase in incidents from 2022 to 2023; media said such violence was often directed at minorities, in particular Hindus.

Freedom House's 2023 annual report stated violence and discrimination against religious minorities remained significant problems in the country. The report stated that members of religious minorities – including Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, and Shia and Ahmadi Muslims – continued to face harassment and violence, including mob violence directed against their houses of worship.

Bauls, a minority religious and cultural group that combines elements of Sufism, Hinduism, and Tantra practices and is best known for its songs and poems, continued to face violence. In March, the media reported that no one had been imprisoned for five attacks on Bauls' meeting places since 2015, including an attack on February 7 in which unknown individuals set fire to a Baul meeting house in Chuadanga District. Baul leaders said attacks and intimidation against them were common phenomena, often spurred by religious fundamentalists.

Human rights organizations and religious leaders continued to say that social media contributed to religious polarization and an increase in attacks on religious minorities. In March, a member of the Ahmadi community said that a series of posts on the *Basherkella* social media account, widely considered by observers to be pro-Jamaat-e-Islami, condemned police efforts to stop anti-Ahmadi violence at the Ahmadi convention in Ahmednagar. The social media posts left the Ahmadi community “shocked and bewildered.” Members of the community accused those who posted on *Basherkella* of using the platform to instigate further attacks against them.

Hindu leaders noted social media was increasingly used to target Hindu communities. BHBCUC General Secretary Rana Dasgupta stated that many of the instances of violence against Hindu communities following social media posts that were allegedly derogatory toward Islam were instigated deliberately. He said that in many cases, “miscreants” opened Facebook accounts in the name of poor people from the Hindu community to spread propaganda. They then spurred attacks on the houses of Hindu community members using the pretext that the social media post hurt religious sentiment.

On February 4, a group of unidentified individuals vandalized statues of Hindu deities in 14 roadside temples in Thakurgaon District. Local Hindu leaders called for police action; police said they were investigating. In a statement, the chairman of the NHRC condemned the vandalism, stating “the right to practice one’s religion is a fundamental human right recognized by the constitution” and called for the government “to ensure exemplary punishment for the people involved in the incidents.”

In September, ASK expressed concern regarding attacks by unidentified individuals on Hindu temples and deity figures in Faridpur District and Bogura City and called for an impartial investigation into the incidents. The NGO said 15 Hindu temples were vandalized across the country from January to July. Hindu leaders of the Faridpur Tambulkhana Durga temple filed a case with police in connection with the vandalism of the deity figures there, which were being constructed for the Durga Puja holiday in October.

Leaders of religious minorities continued to express frustration over what they said was the country’s “communal” nature, which generated conflict between different religious communities who did not always trust or understand each other. At a workshop in Dhaka in September, Hindu leaders rejected discrimination against any religious groups and called for equal civil rights and dignity for the country’s Hindu population. BHBCUC general secretary Rana Dasgupta said, “Our struggle is not for living as a minority. Rather we’re fighting to ensure equal civic rights and dignity for generations to come.”

Human rights NGOs continued to report harassment and social isolation of, and physical violence against, converts to Christianity from Islam and Hinduism. The NGOs said individuals commonly associated a person’s faith with his or her surname. Despite constitutional guarantees protecting an individual’s right to change faiths, the NGOs stated that when someone’s professed faith differed from the faith tradition commonly linked with his or her surname, that person could experience harassment, threats, and social isolation.

In its *World Watch List* report covering 2023, the Christian NGO Open Doors said converts to Christianity in the country faced “severe restrictions and attacks” and were “often accused of betraying their community.” The NGO said that converts “often gather in small house churches due to the risk of attack.” According to the NGO, “Any churches that evangelize among the Muslim majority face persecution” and “even historical denominations like the Roman Catholic Church are increasingly targeted by death threats and attacks.” Monotosh Banajaree, President of the Bangladesh Lutheran Church Mission (BLCM), told the NGO International Christian Concern that the Catholic Church “faces persecution” in the country, but “Protestants tend to face more widespread persecution.” Banajaree said “although some anti-Christian incidents are perpetrated by Hindus, the vast majority are perpetrated by Muslims.” He said “if a Muslim converts to Christianity and declares their allegiance to Jesus publicly, they face immediate threats and violence. These new Christian believers stand to lose their families, communities and very lives.”

According to international media, Patrick D’Rozario, Archbishop Emeritus of the Archdiocese of Dhaka, said in June that the Christian minority in the country was supported by the government which “took a decisive stance in defense” of the Christian community.

Human rights activists expressed concerns regarding the well-being of Hindu and Christian groups in the Muslim-majority refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar which mainly housed Rohingya refugees from Burma. They said the Hindu and Christian communities were segregated from the rest of the camp in response to an increase in violence against them. Hindu refugees said they were free to practice their religion, although they needed special permission to hold festivals, as did all religious groups within the camps; camp officials usually gave that permission. Camp authorities did not allow any permanent structures, such as shelters, houses of worship, or learning centers, regardless of religious affiliation.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and embassy staff engaged throughout the year with senior and other officials in the Foreign, Law, and Home Ministries on the regular abuse of the DSA, including its adverse impact on some members of religious minority communities. After the large-scale attack on the Ahmadi Muslim community in March, the Ambassador publicly expressed deep concern over the violence to government officials and called for accountability.

Throughout the year, the Ambassador visited several places of worship to meet with leaders of major religious communities to support interfaith harmony. Following attacks on the Ahmadi Muslim community in March, the Ambassador visited the Ahmadi Muslim Jama’at headquarters in Dhaka to demonstrate solidarity and discuss the local situation. In a social media post after the visit, the embassy reiterated the U.S. commitment to religious tolerance and denounced violence in the name of religion. Embassy officials met, together with the IHRC, members of the Ahmadi Muslim community on May 21 to show support and gain a better understanding of the problems facing that religious minority. On April 5, the Ambassador hosted an iftar for disadvantaged children in which he discussed the religious diversity of the United States and Bangladesh. Also in April, he toured the International Buddhist Monastery and temple in Dhaka ahead of the Buddha Purnima holiday, giving remarks promoting religious harmony and celebrating the country’s religious diversity. In October, the Ambassador and embassy staff visited Durga Puja festival grounds in Dhaka and met with Hindu leaders as a continuation of the embassy’s outreach to all faiths and to demonstrate support to that religious minority community which was still shaken by memories of anti-Hindu violence during the 2021 Durga Puja celebrations.

Throughout the year, the embassy continued public outreach programs encouraging interfaith tolerance among religious groups. Embassy officials attended religious festivals celebrated by the Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim communities and emphasized at these events the importance of tolerance and respect for religious minorities. Embassy officials continued to meet regularly with a wide range of religious organizations and representatives, including the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, BHBCUC, Bangladesh Christian Association, Hindu Welfare Trust, Buddhist Religious Welfare Trust, Christian Religious Welfare Trust, World Buddhist Association in Bangladesh, Bangladesh Buddhist Federation, Christian Freedom International, and the International Buddhist Monastery of Dhaka. In these meetings, embassy officials and other U.S. government representatives discussed with these groups the state of religious freedom in the country, underscored the importance of religious tolerance, and identified challenges that religious minorities encountered.

The embassy posted more than 50 social media messages highlighting U.S. government commitment to advancing religious freedom. These posts showcased the Ambassador’s participation in various events, the embassy’s engagement with diverse faith communities, culturally significant places of worship, and special commemorations during local religious

holidays. Embassy social media messages on religious tolerance reached more than 2.2 million individuals. Many posts throughout the year received responses expressing strong appreciation for U.S. government commitment to engaging a range of audiences on the importance of religious freedom. After the Ambassador's visit to the city of Rajshahi in September, local media circulated a photo of him in discussion with youths of diverse religious backgrounds as an example of the embassy's engagement with people of multiple faiths.

The United States provided nearly 247 million dollars of humanitarian assistance in fiscal year 2023 to fund programs assisting Rohingya refugees and their local host communities. Most Rohingya in Bangladesh fled genocide in neighboring Burma and have long encountered hatred and animosity over their ethnicity and religion.

As part of U.S.-funded training for community policing, the embassy continued to encourage law enforcement officials to protect the rights of religious minorities.