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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2016 - CHAPTER VI: Human Rights Priority Countries - People's Republic of Bangladesh

There was no improvement in the overall human rights situation in Bangladesh during 2016. Pressure on freedom of expression persisted and extremist attacks and sectarian violence against religious and other minority communities continued. An increasing number of terrorist attacks, including at the Holey Bakery restaurant in Dhaka on 1 July in which 22 people died, saw the government pursue a strict “zero tolerance” approach to terrorism. There were allegations of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture and enforced disappearances involving Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs). Concerns about the treatment of women and girls remain, and the death penalty is still a legal punishment for a wide range of offences. New laws were introduced that had the potential to restrict freedom of expression. Civil society groups have expressed concern that the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) law passed in 2016 may hamper the ability of Bangladeshi NGOs to deliver vital programmes and hold government to account.

In 2016, the UK urged the Bangladesh Government to treat all those arrested in line with Bangladeshi law and international standards. The UK was also clear that there must be no impunity, irrespective of the individual circumstances of the victim or alleged perpetrator. We encourage the government to implement fully the Supreme Court’s judgement on provisions of arrest without warrant and on interrogation on remand.

In 2016, the High Commission supported a review on implementing the Rabat Principles and how legitimate restrictions on freedom of expression to prevent hate speech should be applied in Bangladesh.

The UK also worked closely with international partners to link bloggers under threat from extremist attacks with organisations that provide shelter and support for human rights defenders. Through the Magna Carta Fund, we supported work to draw up clear sentencing guidelines for judges. This will help ensure that, where the death penalty is retained, it is applied in a manner that meets international standards - a step on the path to eventual abolition.

Despite impressive progress towards middle income status and promoting gender equality, Bangladesh continued to score poorly against some indices. The 2016 Global Slavery Index (GSI) placed Bangladesh 21st out of 167 countries for the estimated percentage of people living in conditions which the GSI described as modern slavery. The FCO has supported work to help UK businesses in Bangladesh meet their obligations under the UK’s Modern Slavery Act (2015). Through our partnerships with local human rights NGOs and projects in the justice sector, the UK

pressed for improved implementation of policies protecting and promoting the status and empowerment of women and girls.

Looking ahead, we will engage constructively with all Bangladeshi political parties and our international partners, to strengthen democratic accountability and capacity to hold participatory elections. The formation of the next Election Commission provides a vital opportunity to build confidence that the political process can be free and fair. We will press for zero tolerance against inhumane treatment and abuse of due process in the justice system and by LEAs. And we will encourage the Bangladeshi Government to uphold the international human rights standards it has signed up to and to keep open the space for debate and challenge, including through our support to media and civil society.