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USCIRF Annual Report 2012 - Countries Closely Monitored: Bangladesh

In addition, the Commission continued to follow developments in Bangladesh, which was on USCIRF's Watch List from 2005 to 2008. USCIRF removed Bangladesh from the Watch List after the 2008 general election that brought to power the Awami League party, which is considered to promote secular policies and be favorable toward minority rights, and the announcement by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that her government would implement religious freedom reforms. USCIRF is encouraged by the government's recent steps to begin to rectify past religious freedom violations, including the seizure of Hindu-owned land, and to protect vulnerability of religious and ethnic minorities from exploitation or violence, especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). While these initial steps are commendable, USCIRF will continue to monitor how Bangladesh implements these reforms and recommendations.

In December 2011, the Bangladeshi cabinet passed the Vested Property Return Act, which established an application process for families or individuals to apply for the return of, or compensation for, property seized under the Vested Property Act. However, this process is only available for citizens of Bangladesh who currently reside in the country, leaving out many possible claimants who left the country in previous years. With respect to the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accords, the government has established the Land Commission, the Task Force on Rehabilitation of Jumma Refugees and IDPs (internally displaced persons), and reportedly deferred planned developments

on confiscated lands. These actions demonstrate a governmental effort to resolve long-standing issues relating to IDPs and property confiscation and return.

In the past year, Bangladesh has taken steps to investigate post-2001 election violence, including creating a Commission of Inquiry, which issued recommendations in April 2011 on preventing future violence and ensuring accountability for perpetrators of religiously-motivated violence. Regarding communal violence, in early February an altercation between Muslims and Hindus in the CHT area escalated into wider violence, destruction and looting. Hindu temples and shrines, and mosques, as well as businesses, were burned and looted. According to the Hindu American Foundation, the Bangladesh High Court Division of the Supreme Court ordered that the Bangladesh government assist in restoring Hindu properties that were damaged or destroyed in the violence, mandated that protection be provided to minorities in the area, and directed the local police to find perpetrators of crimes and hold them responsible. Reportedly, local police have filed two cases, naming approximately 800 individuals for the arson and vandalism of several Hindu temples, shrines, and other property.