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BANGLADESH

In 2014, societal discrimination, harassment, intimidation, and occasional violence against religious minority communities, especially the Hindu minority population, continued in Bangladesh. In addition, illegal land appropriations, commonly referred to as land-grabbing, and ownership disputes remain widespread, with a disproportionate number of religious minorities being targeted. Additionally, while the government has made some progress in complying with the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, the ruling Awami League and other political parties use religiously-divisive language and, on occasion, act in ways that exacerbate rather than diminish religious and communal tensions. In September 2014, a USCIRF staff member travelled to the country to assess the religious freedom situation.

Background

On January 5, 2014, Bangladesh held its parliamentary election, which was not free or fair, with more than half of the seats uncontested. The main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and 18 other political parties boycotted the election. Post-election violence occurred in 16 out of 64 districts in Bangladesh, with most attacks attributed to individuals and groups associated with the BNP and the main religious party Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat). The worst attacks occurred in minority-dominated villages. Dozens of Hindu properties were looted, vandalized, or set ablaze, and

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Minister Sheikh Hasina made public statements in support of religious minority communities after the violence, but reports emerged that police and security forces dispatched by the government to affected areas did not actively stop the violence and, in some cases, participated in it.

According to the country's 2011 census, approximately 90 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. Hindus are 9.5 percent of the total population, and all other faiths, including Christians and Buddhists, are less than one percent.

Murder of Bloggers and Charges of Blasphemy

After the reporting period, two self-professed secular bloggers were brutally murdered in separate incidents on public streets in Dhaka. Avijit Roy, an American citizen of Bangladeshi descent, was hacked to death on February 26, 2015; Roy's wife was critically injured. One suspect was arrested and charged in early March 2015. On March 30, 2015, Washiqur Rahman also was hacked to death; four men have been arrested and charged. During the reporting period, three self-professed atheists were released from detention; they had been arrested and charged with "offending religious sensitivities" in April 2013 after they blogged about Bangladesh's 1971 War Crimes Tribunals. In 2013, individuals associated with Jamaat reportedly gave the government a list naming 84 other individuals they wanted to see investigated for blasphemy.

Property Returns

In 2011, the Vested Property Return Act established an application process for families or individuals to apply for the return of, or compensation for, Hindu property seized prior to Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971. However, Hindu communities and NGOs complain that the Act is too narrowly defined, the application process too cumbersome and convoluted,

and only a small percentage of eligible properties have been returned.

Land Grabbing

Representatives of minority communities told USCIRF that land-grabbing is a significant concern and is widespread throughout Bangladesh. Land-grabbing affects all communities, although religious minorities, particularly Hindus, appear disproportionately targeted

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for displacement from land they have claimed for generations. Reportedly, local police and political leaders, including some members of the national parliament, are occasionally involved in land-grabbing and/or shielding politically-influential individuals from prosecution. Land-grabbing is most frequent near roads or in industrial zones where land is at a premium; therefore, it is difficult to determine if minorities are targeted due to their religious faith, their vulnerable status as minorities, or the value of the property.

Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord (CHT Accord)

The CHT Accord is a political agreement and peace treaty between the Bangladeshi government and the political party representing the ethnic and indigenous people of the area, of whom nearly 50 percent are followers of Theravada Buddhism. According to information provided to USCIRF by the Bangladeshi government, out of 72 articles of the CHT Accord, 48 have been fully implemented, 15 have been partially implemented, and nine have yet to be implemented. However, individuals representing the area assert that only 25 articles have been fully implemented. In February 2015, the Home Ministry restricted access to the area by foreign visitors and both national and international organizations,

apparently to limit reporting on disputes between the local people and the military.

Rohingya Muslims

The Bangladeshi government considers the estimated 30,000 Rohingya Muslims residing in two government-run camps in Cox's Bazaar near the Bangladesh-Burmese border as refugees from Burma, while the estimated 200,000 to 500,000 Rohingya Muslims living outside of the camps elsewhere in Bangladesh are treated as illegal immigrants. In February 2014, Bangladesh adopted a national strategy to respond to the Rohingya Muslim population in the country, which includes providing more humanitarian assistance and engaging Burma. In November 2014, Prime Minister Hasina announced that the two refugee camps, which are supported by the UNHCR, would be moved to improve the current living conditions of the refugees, which she described as inhumane. While UNHCR welcomed the announcement, it also indicated that the move would be costly and could lead to fear and tension in the Rohingya community. UNHCR reports that the Rohingya Muslims living outside the camps receive no support from the agency and live in deplorable conditions.

Recommendations

In its engagement with Bangladesh, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should: urge Prime Minister Hasina and all government officials to frequently and publicly denounce religiously-divisive language and acts of religiously-motivated violence and harassment; assist the Bangladeshi government to provide local government officials, police officers and judges with training on international human rights standards, as well as how to investigate and adjudicate religiously-motivated violent acts; and urge the government of Bangladesh to investigate claims of land-grabbing, rescind the order restricting NGO access to the Chittagong area, and revoke its blasphemy law.