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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2015 - Chapter IV: Human Rights Priority Countries - Bangladesh

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There was no improvement in the overall human rights situation in Bangladesh in 2015. Tensions between the two main political parties, the ruling Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), remain unresolved. Confrontational actions during the first quarter of 2015, including the arrest of senior BNP leaders, an indefinite BNP-led transport blockade, and repeated hartals (labour strikes) impacted on people's security and livelihoods. The relatively peaceful and participatory Municipal Elections on 30 December, held on party lines for the first time, were a positive development.

A rise in the number of extremist attacks against secularist writers and religious minorities during 2015 increased pressure on free speech, while the draft Foreign Donations Act risks becoming a missed opportunity to improve the regulatory regime for NGOs. Through its Human Rights and Democracy Programme, the UK provided safety training to bloggers in Bangladesh, and supported a review of the Information and Communication Technology Act 2006 to bring it into line with international standards.

An overloaded justice system and delays in processing through the courts contributed to a culture of violence where people take the law into their own hands. NGOs reported that excessive use of force, extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances were conducted with impunity, while the death penalty remained a legal punishment for a wide range of offences. In 2015, at least five people were executed, including three war criminals convicted by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT). NGOs continued to express concern over the process and independence of the ICT. During 2015, the Department for International Development contributed £3.7 million towards justice sector reform and £1.2 million for a police reform programme in Bangladesh.

Women make a considerable contribution to the Bangladesh economy; many are employed in the public service and the ready-made garments sector. However, women still do not enjoy the same social status as men, and gender-based violence remains a substantial problem. Child marriage also remains a significant concern.

Bangladesh has a growing economy and aspires to reach middle-income status by 2021. We encourage the Bangladesh authorities to ensure that this is matched by a positive human rights trajectory during 2016 and

beyond. Positive indicators would include careful consideration of recommendations by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief when his report is released in 2016. We will also encourage the government to engage constructively with the UN Human Rights Committee when it reviews Bangladesh in October 2016. We remain clear that an effective justice system, and a vibrant civil society and free media, able to challenge and hold authority to account, are fundamental to a successful democracy. Free, fair and participatory elections are also crucial; we encourage all political parties to work towards achieving this at the parliamentary elections in 2019.

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