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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2015 - Human Rights Priority Country update report: January to June 2016 - Bangladesh

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There was no improvement in the human rights situation in Bangladesh in the first 6 months of 2016. The municipal elections, which ended in May and were held on party lines for the first time, saw significant levels of violence. 116 people were reported killed, mainly as the result of intra-party clashes. There were also concerns around the role of the Election Commission who, it is alleged, failed to address reports of groups and individuals breaking election rules.

Extremist attacks on minority groups and threats against secular bloggers continued. The then Prime Minister discussed the global increase of extremism and the spread of attacks in Bangladesh with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, when they met at the G7 meeting on 27 May.

The UK continues to support and promote freedom of expression and protection for those who exercise it in Bangladesh, including through a new programme funded by the Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy. The British High Commission is also working closely with international partners in Bangladesh to support those under threat from extremist attacks, such as providing information on help available from local, regional and international non-governmental organisations. We continue to urge the government of Bangladesh to ensure that those carrying out extremist attacks are held to account, that life is protected and that the right to justice and free speech for all Bangladeshis is upheld.

In addition to extremist attacks on Christians, Buddhists and Hindus, 2016 has also seen an increase of wider intolerance towards minority religions. Incidents include the high-profile case in May of a Hindu teacher being beaten and humiliated for allegedly making derogatory comments about Islam. The UK continues to promote tolerance, inclusion, justice and diversity, for example in a [statement](#) made by the British High Commissioner to mark the 117th anniversary of the birth of Bangladesh National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, whose work championed these values.

The Supreme Court delivered a number of judgments on orders upholding the rights of the citizens. For example, on 25 May, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court upheld a High Court order to reform provisions of arrest without warrant and interrogation on remand under Sections 54 and 167 of the Criminal

Procedure Code (CrPC) 1898. The changes ordered included: showing identification when making an arrest, informing the person arrested of the reason within 3 hours, providing access to lawyers and relatives, seeking permission from a magistrate before interrogating in custody and ensuring the detainee is checked by a doctor before and after interrogation. If implemented properly, these reform provisions have the potential to bring fundamental changes to current practices of Law Enforcement Agencies.

However, institutional barriers to implementing these changes remain a major concern, and reports of excessive use of force, extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances by law enforcement agencies continued. In June, a number of suspected militants and individuals accused of extremist murders were killed in alleged crossfire incidents between police and criminal gangs. Some of those killed were reported to have been in police custody at the time of their deaths. Allegations from relatives of torture and mistreatment in police custody continue.

At the Westminster Hall Debate on Bangladesh on 30 June the then FCO Minister for Asia, Hugo Swire welcomed the government of Bangladesh's commitment to bring those responsible for recent extremist attacks to justice. He also made clear that, "it is important that justice is delivered in a manner which fully respects the international human rights standards which, as members of the Commonwealth and the UN Human Rights Council, Bangladesh has pledged to uphold."

NGOs called for the repeal of "vague and overly broad" sedition laws in Bangladesh when over 50 private criminal charges, for sedition and defamation, were brought against editors of two of Bangladesh's largest media outlets. Charges brought against newspaper editors, even if eventually dismissed by the courts, can be a form of harassment and intimidation.

Proposed new laws such as the Bangladesh Liberation War (Denial, Distortion, Opposition) Crime Law and the Digital Security Act have the potential to further squeeze free speech in Bangladesh. The draft Digital Security Act includes a similarly vague provision that hands a two-year sentence to anyone who defames or hurts someone else's religious sentiment. While welcoming the modernisation of legal provisions in Bangladesh, we will continue to watch their development closely and raise any concerns.

Motiur Rahman Nizami, found guilty of war crimes by the domestic International Crimes Tribunal, was hanged on 10 May. While respecting that it is important that people who carried out atrocities during the 1971 Liberation War are brought to account, the UK has been clear with the government of Bangladesh that we oppose the death penalty in all circumstances, and we have called for a moratorium.

Gender-based violence and sexual assault remain common. The rape and murder of university student Sohagi Jahan Tonu in Comilla on 20 March caused nationwide protests and put the spotlight on the widespread occurrence of sexual assault and on failures in the criminal justice system to investigate and prosecute such cases effectively. Child marriage and child labour also remain prevalent. The 2016 Global Slavery Index placed Bangladesh 10th out of 167 countries, and estimated that 1.5 million people were classed as living in slavery. As part of our work on Business and Human Rights, we are supporting work to help UK businesses operating in Bangladesh meet their obligations under the UK's Modern Day Slavery Act (2015). The British High Commission in Bangladesh is also supporting efforts to raise awareness of and embed the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in the ready-made garment and tannery sectors.

Looking ahead to the second half of 2016, we want Bangladesh to develop into an economically successful country that maintains its Bengali tradition of respect and tolerance for all people of all faiths and backgrounds. We also continue to be clear that an effective justice system, vibrant civil society, free media and freedom to hold authority to account remain important as Bangladesh heads towards middle-income status, and fully graduates from least developed country status.