

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	275
Land:	Bangladesh
Kilde:	USCIRF
Titel:	USCIRF Annual Report 2017 – Tier 3: Other countries/regions monitored - Bangladesh
Udgivet:	26. april 2017
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	6. juni 2017

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Publisher [United States Commission on International Religious Freedom](#)

Publication Date 26 April 2017

Cite as United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *USCIRF Annual Report 2017 - Tier 3: Other countries/regions monitored - Bangladesh*, 26 April 2017, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/59072f383d.html> [accessed 1 May 2017]

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KEY FINDINGS

In 2016, the frequency of violent and deadly attacks against religious minorities, secular bloggers, intellectuals, and foreigners by domestic and transnational extremist groups increased. Although the government, led by the ruling Awami League, has taken steps to investigate, arrest, and prosecute perpetrators and increase protection for likely targets, the threats and violence have heightened the sense of fear among Bangladeshi citizens of all religious groups. In addition, illegal land appropriations – commonly referred to as land-grabbing – and ownership disputes remain widespread, particularly against Hindus and Christians. Other concerns include issues related to property returns and the situation of Rohingya Muslims. In March 2016, a USCIRF staff member traveled to Bangladesh to assess the religious freedom situation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should: provide technical assistance and encourage the Bangladeshi government to further develop its national counterterrorism strategy; urge Prime Minister Sheikh 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 in providing 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; urge the Bangladeshi government to investigate claims of land-grabbing and to repeal its blasphemy law; and encourage the Bangladeshi government to continue to provide humanitarian assistance and a safe haven for Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution in Burma.

BACKGROUND

According to the United Nations (UN), Bangladesh's population is nearly 164 million. Approximately 90 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim and 9.5 percent is Hindu; all other faiths, including Christians and Buddhists, make up the remaining 0.5 percent. Bangladesh,

including its capital of Dhaka, is one of the most population-dense areas in the world, which can make policing difficult.

Bangladesh's political landscape is deeply divided between the ruling Awami League and the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The January 2014 parliamentary election was neither free nor fair, and was followed by violence in 16 out of 64 districts. The worst attacks occurred in minority-dominated villages. Dozens of Hindu properties were looted or set ablaze, and hundreds of Hindus fled their homes. Christian and Buddhist communities also were targeted. Most attacks were attributed to individuals and groups associated with the BNP and the main Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat).

Historically, Bangladesh, while having some longstanding religious freedom issues, was not afflicted with widespread domestic and transnational extremist and terrorist organizations that targeted religious communities or the government. However, beginning in late 2014, Bangladesh began to experience an increasing number of violent attacks by such groups, especially Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Notably, four Bangladeshis – Washiqur Rahman Babu, Ananta Bijoy Das, Niloy Chatterjee, and Faisal Arefin Dipan – and one Bangladeshi-American, Avijit Roy, were assassinated for their writings on secularism and freedom of thought, religious and communal tolerance, and political transparency and accountability in 2015. Additionally, "Hit Lists" of individuals targeted for assassination because of their secularist or atheist views were widely available on the Internet, and dozens of individuals were forced to flee the country or their areas of residence.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2016–2017

Targeting of Religious Communities by Extremists and Terrorist Organizations

In 2016, for the second year in a row, there were numerous deadly attacks claimed by or attributed to extremist groups – especially JMB and ISIS – targeting religious minorities, secular bloggers, intellectuals, and foreigners. For example, in January, February, and June, three Hindu priests were killed in Jhenaidah, Panchagarh, and Jhinaigah districts, respectively. In April, a liberal professor was killed by ISIS militants, who slit his throat. In the same month, a 26-year-old secular blogger, Nazimuddin Samad, was killed in Dhaka. In June, a Christian man was killed while leaving a church in Bonpara, Rajshahi district. In the last year, ISIS also targeted members of the Sunni majority. For example, on July 8 four Sunni Muslims were killed in a bomb and gun attack at a local mosque during Eid-al-Fitr celebrations.

The attacks raised fears among all Bangladeshis, although religious minority communities are especially fearful because terrorist organizations such as ISIS have said they seek to create an Islamic caliphate in which minorities are not welcome. In response to the attacks, the Bangladeshi government has shown some political will to investigate and arrest perpetrators, provide protection to likely targets, and actively combat extremist and terrorist groups. For example, in a controversial act in June 2016 the government arrested nearly 11,000 individuals, including some suspected of ties to terrorist groups. While domestic and international human rights groups criticized the action as overly broad, religious minority leaders welcomed it.

Additionally, in the past year the government began monitoring at least a dozen nongovernmental organizations suspected of receiving funds from abroad to finance terrorist groups banned in

Bangladesh; the government also accepted assistance from the United States to track terrorist groups and investigate incidents when they occur, and increased protection for religious minority communities, especially around religious holidays and festivals. Nevertheless, religious minority communities report the government's failure to publicly acknowledge ISIS' presence in the country has created an intelligence void, making it difficult to stop attacks before they occur. Minority communities also believe the government has not provided enough training and equipment to police to disperse violent mobs. Furthermore, they report that government officials from the Awami League, BNP, and Jamaat continue to use religiously divisive rhetoric for political gains.

October 2016 Attack against Hindus

On October 31, 2016, in Nasirnagar, Brahmanbaria district, a mob of at least 100 Muslims violently attacked a Hindu village. Although police reinforcements, members of Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion force, and paramilitary border guards were dispatched to the area, the attack left dozens injured and at least 15 Hindu temples and over 200 homes badly damaged and looted. Smaller attacks against Hindus in the area also were reported. According to initial media reports, two Islamist groups – Hefajat-e-Islam and Ahle Sunnat – incited the violence by alleging that a young man posted on Facebook an edited photo of a Hindu deity sitting on top of the Kaaba, a sacred Islamic site in Mecca. However, an investigation by the governmental National Human Rights Commission found the incident was a preplanned effort to push Hindus out of the area and grab their land. The government's Forensic Department of Police Bureau of Investigation reported that the Facebook photo was planted, likely to incite the violence.

The government of Bangladesh reports that more than 1,000 people connected to the Nasirnagar incident and the smaller attacks have been arrested and/or charged, and the Nasirnagar chief police officer and three local Awami League party leaders have been suspended for their involvement. Additionally, the government reportedly instructed local police to continuously patrol 10 key areas to ensure no additional attacks occur, and three committees constituted to investigate the incidents continue their work.

Land-Grabbing and Governmental Eminent Domain

Illegal seizures of land, commonly referred to as land-grabbing, by individuals – including local police and political leaders – is a significant concern throughout Bangladesh. Violent attacks on property holders and arson almost always accompany incidents of landgrabbing. Moreover, local governments and police often fail to investigate violent attacks that accompany landgrabs because their colleagues are implicated. Additionally, in recent years the government increasingly has used eminent domain to take land, reportedly for economic or infrastructure development, without adequate compensation or relocation assistance. In both the case of land-grabbing and eminent domain, religious and ethnic minorities, particularly Hindus, believe they are especially vulnerable targets due to a lack of political representation. Land-grabbing and governmental eminent domain affects all communities, which makes it difficult to determine if minorities are targeted due to their faith, their vulnerable status as minorities, or the value of their property.

Property Returns

In 2011, the Vested Property Return Act (later amended in 2013) established an application process for families or individuals to apply for the return of or compensation for property seized by the

government prior to and immediately after Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971. The Hindu community was especially affected by the government's property seizures. Separate vested property tribunals have been created to review and resolve claims. However, religious minority communities have reported that the process is cumbersome and confusing, and that many properties are not eligible for return or compensation under the act. In June 2016, the Coordinated Cell for Implementation of Vested Properties Return Act – a nongovernmental organization that represents 10 organizations with claims for property returns – alleged that government officials tasked with reviewing claims were denying them, even when required documentation was in order, or were classifying properties as governmental and therefore not eligible for return. Moreover, the same group reported that 70 percent of all claims remain unsolved four years after the act was enacted.

Rohingya Muslims

For decades, Bangladesh has hosted – in two government- run camps in Cox's Bazaar near the Bangladesh-Burmese border – an estimated 30,000 officially recognized Rohingya Muslim refugees who fled religious persecution in Burma. An estimated 200,000 to 500,000 Rohingya Muslims deemed illegal immigrants live outside the camps in deplorable conditions. In 2016, the Bangladeshi government completed a census of the Rohingya population, but the results are not publicly available. Reportedly, participants in the census will receive an identification card from the International Organization for Migration, which will improve access to healthcare and education.

The government of Bangladesh estimates that due to increased persecution in Burma, 65,000 Rohingya Muslims fled to Bangladesh between October 2016 and January 2017. Reportedly, thousands more have amassed on the border between the two countries. Despite appeals by the UN and human rights organizations, the Bangladeshi government has refused to open its borders and has been turning away Rohingya Muslims, who the UN says are facing ethnic cleansing in Burma.