

BANGLADESH 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution designates Islam as the state religion but upholds the principle of secularism. It prohibits religious discrimination and provides for equality for all religions. Parliament enacted a new law further regulating groups receiving foreign funding, including religious organizations. The government provided guidance to imams throughout the country on some aspects of the content of their sermons in an effort to prevent support of militancy and said it would monitor mosques for provocative messaging. The government made some progress in arresting and indicting attackers of bloggers from previous years, although top officials continued to blame writers for offending religious sentiments. According to religious minority groups, the government continued to discriminate against them in property disputes and did not adequately protect them from attacks. The government did not adjudicate any of the more than one million pending restitution cases involving land seized from Hindus declared to be enemies of the state before the country's independence.

Terrorist organizations claimed responsibility for a significant number of attacks, many of them fatal, against multiple religious minorities. There were at least 24 individuals killed in these attacks including members of the country's Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, and other minority communities. Terrorist groups also targeted religious converts, Shia, and individuals who engaged in activities deemed atheistic. On July 1, five militants attacked a restaurant in Dhaka, targeting mostly non-Muslims; 24 were killed, including two police officers. Individuals and groups continued to threaten bloggers and other individuals for offending Islam; attackers claiming affiliation with al-Qaida killed one blogger on April 6.

There were a significant number of attacks against religious minorities, particularly Hindus. In October hundreds of villagers in the eastern part of the country vandalized more than 50 Hindu family homes and 15 Hindu temples, following a Facebook post believed by some to be offensive to Islam. High levels of election-related violence in June resulted in the death of 126 individuals and injuries to 9,000 others. In one attack in a suburb of Dhaka, the media reported hundreds of attackers used sticks and bamboo poles to beat a group of Catholics and vandalize their homes and shops, injuring an estimated 60 people.

In meetings with government officials and in public statements, the U.S. Ambassador and other embassy representatives spoke out against acts of violence in the name of religion and encouraged the government to uphold the rights of minority religious groups and to foster a climate of diversity and tolerance. The embassy publicly condemned the attacks against members of religious minorities and called on the government to bring those responsible to justice. During his visit to the country in December, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom also raised these concerns with government interlocutors. The Ambassador and embassy staff met with local government officials, civil society members, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and religious leaders to underscore the importance of religious tolerance and to explore the link between religion and violent extremism. The embassy coordinated with other foreign missions to promote religious tolerance, identifying support mechanisms for threatened secular bloggers, and providing humanitarian assistance to Rohingya Muslim fleeing Burma.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 156.2 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the latest available, Sunni Muslims constitute 90 percent of the total population, and Hindus 9.5 percent. The remainder of the population is predominantly Christian (mostly Roman Catholic) and Theravada-Hinayana Buddhist. There are also small numbers of Shia Muslims, Bahais, animists, Ahmadi Muslims, agnostics, and atheists. Many of these communities estimate their numbers at between a few thousand and 100,000 adherents. Many ethnic minorities practice minority religions and are concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and northern districts. For example, the Garo in Mymensingh are predominantly Christian as are the Santal in Gaibandha. Most Buddhists are members of the indigenous (non-Bengali) populations of the CHT. Bengali and ethnic minority Christians live in communities across the country, with relatively high concentrations in Barisal City, Gournadi in Barisal District, Baniarchar in Gopalganj, Monipuripara, and Christianpara in Dhaka city, Nagori in Gazipur and Khulna city.

The largest noncitizen population consists of Rohingya Muslims. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, there are 32,967 Rohingya refugees from Burma registered in the country residing in one of two official refugee camps within Cox's Bazar district. The International Organization for Migration estimates another 200,000 to 500,000 unregistered Rohingya from Burma are in

the southeast in Cox's Bazar district. As many as 90,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh following violence in Rakhine State in October.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, “the state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions.” The constitution also stipulates the state shall uphold secularism by not granting political status in favor of any religion and by prohibiting the abuse of religion for political purposes and discrimination or persecution of persons practicing any religion. It also provides for the right to profess, practice, or propagate all religions “subject to law, public order, and morality,” and states religious communities or denominations have the right to establish, maintain, and manage their religious institutions. The constitution stipulates no one attending any educational institution shall be required to receive instruction in, or participate in ceremonies or worship pertaining to, a religion to which he or she does not belong.

Under the penal code, statements or acts made with a “deliberate and malicious” intent to insult religious sentiments are subject to fines of up to two years in prison. Although the code does not define “intent to insult religious sentiments,” the courts have interpreted it to include insulting the Prophet Muhammad. The criminal code allows the government to confiscate all copies of any newspaper, magazine, or other publication containing language that “creates enmity and hatred among the citizens or denigrates religious beliefs.” The law applies similar restrictions to online publications.

The constitution limits freedom of association in instances where an association is formed for the purpose of destroying religious harmony or creating discrimination on religious grounds among citizens.

There is no registration requirement for individual houses of worship, but religious groups that wish to form associations with multiple houses of worship are required to register with either the NGO Affairs Bureau if they receive foreign assistance for development projects, or the Ministry of Social Welfare if they do not. Parliament enacted a new law in October further regulating institutions that receive foreign funding. The law places restrictions on the receipt of foreign funds by NGOs, including religious organizations. The act requires the NGO Affairs

Bureau to approve and monitor all projects. The director general has the authority to impose sanctions on NGOs for violating the law, including fines of up to three times the amount of the foreign donation or closure of the NGO. NGOs are also subject to penalties for “derogatory” comments about the constitution or constitutional institutions (i.e. the government). Expatriate staff must receive a security clearance from the National Security Intelligence Agency, the Special Branch of the police, and the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence.

The registration requirement and procedures are the same as for secular associations. The requirements to register with the Ministry of Social Welfare include submission of certification that the name being registered is not taken; provision of the bylaws/constitution of the organization; a security clearance for leaders of the organization from the country’s intelligence agency; minutes of the meeting appointing the executive committee; a list of all executive committee and general members and photographs of principal officers; a work plan; a copy of the deed or lease of the organization’s office and a list of property owned; a budget; and a recommendation by a local government representative. Requirements to register with the NGO Affairs Bureau are still in flux, but they are expected to be similar.

Family law concerning marriage, divorce, and adoption has separate provisions for Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. These laws are enforced in the same secular courts. There is a separate civil family law for mixed faith families or those of other faiths or no faith. The family law of the religion of the two parties concerned governs their marriage rituals and proceedings. A Muslim man may have as many as four wives although he must obtain the written consent of his existing wife or wives before marrying again. A Christian man may marry only one woman. Under Hindu law, men may have multiple wives, but there are officially no options for divorce. Women may not inherit property under Hindu law. Buddhists are covered under Hindu law and divorced Hindus and Buddhists may not legally remarry. Divorced men and women of other religions and widowed individuals of any religion may remarry. Marriage between members of different religious groups is allowed and occurs under civil law. To be legally recognized, Muslim marriages must be registered with the state by either the couple or the cleric performing the marriage, but many are not. Registration for Hindus is optional, and other faiths may determine their own guidelines.

Under the Muslim family ordinance, a widow receives one eighth of her husband’s estate, and the remainder is divided among the children with each female child receiving half the share of each male child. Wives have fewer divorce rights than

husbands. Courts must approve divorces and the law requires a Muslim man to pay a former wife three months of alimony, but these protections generally apply only to registered marriages; unregistered marriages are by definition undocumented and difficult to substantiate. In addition, authorities do not always enforce the alimony requirement even in cases involving registered marriages.

Alternative dispute resolution is available to all citizens, including Muslims, for settling family arguments and other civil matters not related to land ownership. With the consent of both parties, lawyers may be identified to facilitate the arbitration, the results of which may be used in court.

Fatwas may be issued only by Muslim religious scholars, and not by local religious leaders, to settle matters of religious practice. Fatwas may not be invoked to justify meting out punishment, nor may they supersede existing secular law.

Religious studies are compulsory and part of the curriculum for grades three through 10 in all government-accredited schools. Private schools do not have this requirement. Students receive instruction in their own religious beliefs from teachers provided by the government although the teachers are not always adherents of the students' faith.

The code regulating prisons allows for observance of religious commemorations for prisoners, including access to extra food on feast days or permission to fast for religious reasons. The law does not guarantee prisoners regular access to clergy or regular religious services, but prison authorities may arrange special religious programs for them. Prison authorities are required to provide prisoners facing the death penalty access to a religious figure from a religion of their choice before execution.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The government arrested suspects in the killings of several secular bloggers who reportedly "offended Islam." On July 20, five men were charged in Oyasiqur Rahman's March 2015 killing and their trial began on August 4. Three of the suspects remained in custody, including Akram Hossain Hasib (also known as Boro Bhai), while the other two were released on bail. Police also arrested Patwary, a suspect in the killing of Ahmedur Rashid Tutul, and Moinul Islam Shamim, a suspect in the killing of Bangladeshi American writer Faisal Arefin

Deepan, on June 15 and August 24, respectively. Shariful Islam Shihab, a suspect in the killing of Avijit Roy, was killed during a “gunfight” with police on June 19, although human rights organizations stated that this and other gunfights with police were in fact extrajudicial killings. Police offered monetary rewards for leads in the secular blogger killings, which led to the May 19 arrest of two members of the militant group Ansarullah Bangla Team who were suspected to have links to the attacks.

Religious minority communities such as Hindus and Christians, who are often also ethnic minorities, reported the government continued to displace them, by force if necessary, because of land ownership disputes that disproportionately affected them. According to religious associations, such disputes continued to occur in areas near new roads or industrial development zones, where land prices had recently increased. They also stated local police, civil authorities, and political leaders sometimes enabled property appropriation for financial gain or shielded politically influential property appropriators from prosecution. Some human rights groups attributed the lack of resolution of these disputes to the ineffectiveness of the judicial and land registry systems and to the lack of political and financial clout of the targeted religious communities rather than to government policy disfavoring religious or ethnic minorities.

On November 6, police in Gaibandha fired on Santal tribal people, most of whom were Christian, who were trying to occupy land the government had acquired in 1962 to grow sugarcane for a sugar mill. The Santal people used bows and arrows to fight the police and former mill employees. Three Santal people were killed and 25 were injured in the altercation. In May the media reported that the district administration of Moulvibazar in the northeast issued a notice to 700 mostly Catholic indigenous Khasia people to move from their ancestral lands and accused them of illegally occupying 60 hectares (150 acres) of government property and running betel leaf plantations. Tribal activists stated the district administration was acting in support of the Nahar Tea Estate, a company which had been trying to expand into the property since 2007. Tribal activists continued to fight the order at the year’s end.

In August the media reported Aktar Hossain, a local council member in Rangpur, directed a local woman and man be punished for an “extramarital affair” that occurred when the man broke into the woman’s house while her husband was gone. Without hearing testimony from the woman, council members determined her husband should cane her 101 times before 400 assembled villagers while the council member should cane the man 20 times. In the same month, the Ministry of

Local Government, Rural Development, and Cooperatives stated it ordered district commissioners to mandate local councils prevent village leaders from using fatwas to punish villagers extrajudicially.

The government continued to provide law enforcement personnel at religious sites, festivals, and events considered targets for violence. The government also provided additional security at the Hindu festival of Durga Puja, Christmas, Easter, the Buddhist festival of Buddha Purnima, and the Bengali New Year or Pohela Boishakh.

Although most mosques were independent of the state, the government continued to provide guidance to imams throughout the country on some aspects of the content of their sermons. Following well publicized terrorist attacks on the Holey Artisan Bakery and the Sholakia Eid prayer grounds in July, the government-funded Islamic Foundation issued a sermon denouncing militancy, and suggested imams use it during Friday afternoon prayers. After a backlash from imams against government interference, the Islamic Foundation issued key passages from the Quran, which it suggested imams highlight. A prominent government-aligned cleric issued a religious edict denouncing militancy, which more than 100,000 imams reportedly signed but which many nongovernment-aligned imams rejected.

As part of its antimilitancy drive, the government pledged in July to monitor the sermons of the country's more than 250,000 mosques for provocative messaging using the Islamic Foundation's 1,400 regular staff, civil servants, law enforcement authorities, and the general public. The government could appoint and remove imams and had a strong influence over sermon content at the state-run National Mosque in Dhaka. Religious community leaders said imams in all mosques usually avoided sermons that contradicted government policy.

The government prohibited transmission of India-based Islamic televangelist Zakir Naik's Peace TV Bangla, which it stated spread extremist ideologies, and closed "peace schools" affiliated with his teachings. According to civil society organizations, the government overreached in its efforts to ban Peace TV Bangla and could have allowed the locally produced programs featured on the channel to air, even if they wanted to censor Zakir Naik's show.

On May 4, Minister of Information Hasanul Haque Inu announced the implementation of a media monitoring cell, which he stated would follow media and blogs that write negatively about Hindu, Muslim, and other religious beliefs, which he said contributed to theist-atheist divisions in the country. Activists stated

the government Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission took steps in May to block the popular online blog platform *somewhereinblog*, a site used in the past by secular bloggers.

Following attacks against bloggers whom militants accused of offending Islam, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan stated bloggers “should control their writing...people should be careful not to hurt anyone by writing anything” that might hurt “any religion, any people’s beliefs, and religious leaders.” Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed stated “It’s not at all acceptable if anyone writes against our prophet or other religions.”

The government again did not adjudicate any of the more than one million pending restitution cases involving land seized from Hindus who left Bangladesh before the nation’s independence and were characterized as enemies of the state at that time. The cases have remained pending since a 2011 law allowed the prior owners of the land to appeal the seizures.

Religious minorities said minority students sometimes were not able to enroll in religion classes of their faith because of a lack of minority teachers for mandatory religious education classes. In these cases, school officials generally allowed for arrangements with local religious institutions, parents, or others to hold religious studies classes for such students outside of school hours and sometimes exempted the students from the religious education requirement.

Civil society groups, including Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, and Banchte Shekha criticized the government for maintaining restrictive laws with regard to Hindu marriage and divorce. A survey conducted during the year by Research Initiatives in Bangladesh and MJF showed that 26.7 percent of Hindu men and 29.2 percent of Hindu women would like to obtain a divorce but did not do so because of existing laws.

The government provided the Islamic Foundation, administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, with 3.5 billion taka (\$44.3 million) in 2015, the latest figures available, from a line item in the government budget for activities relating to promoting the values and ideals of Islam, including religious education and provision of training for imams. The government also provided grants in aid to 2,134 Muslim institutions amounting to 185.49 million taka (\$2.3 million). In 2016, the government worked with representatives from three trusts intended to benefit minority religious groups: the Hindu Welfare Trust (with assets of 205 million taka, \$2.6 million), the Christian Religious Welfare Trust (assets of 50

million taka, \$633,000), and the Buddhist Welfare Trust (assets of 70 million taka, \$886,000). The three trusts were managed by trustees who were members of their respective religious communities and used interest from their assets to fund temple, church, and monastery development and repairs.

During the year, the Hindu and Buddhist trusts received support from the government for religious education. In addition, the Hindu Welfare Trust received from the government payment for staff salaries. Also, 1,173 Hindu institutions received 41.95 million taka (\$531,000) from parliament from the revenue budget for temple development and a 15 million taka (\$190,000) donation from the prime minister to celebrate Durja Puja. One hundred and forty six Buddhist institutions received 4.13 million taka (\$52,300) for temple development and repairs and the Buddhist Welfare Trust received 5 million taka (\$63,300) from the prime minister to celebrate religious festivals.

Fifteen Christian institutions received 3.15 million taka (\$39,900) from the government for church upkeep and repair. The Christian Religious Welfare Trust did not apply for additional special grants from the government. Minority religious leaders continued to state the government did not fund the trusts on an equal basis with the Islamic Foundation. They reported the foundation received yearly allocations of funds from the state budget while the trusts had to rely on income generated from government contributions to their capital funds.

The president continued to host receptions to commemorate each of the principal Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian holidays.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Extremist groups, many claiming to be affiliated with ISIS or al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), attacked religious minorities. Assailants used machetes in most of the attacks. The majority of attacks targeted members of the Hindu community. Ten Hindus, including priests, temple workers, teachers, and businesspeople, were killed in 10 separate attacks between February and July, compared to three attacks resulting in one death in 2015. ISIS claimed responsibility for seven of the attacks.

On July 1, five militants killed 24 people, most of them non-Muslims, at the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka. Assailants reportedly targeted non-Muslims and asked some hostages to recite verses from the Quran. The media reported the attackers tortured some of the hostages and killed them with machetes. Military forces

killed the five attackers during a rescue operation. In August police killed Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury, one of the suspected organizers of the attack and captured or killed other suspected collaborators during a series of raids in the second half of 2016. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack, but the government stated the perpetrators belonged to an offshoot of the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, to which it referred as the Neo JMB.

There were also attacks directed against Muslims. On July 7, ISIS claimed responsibility for a bomb blast and gun battle near the site of a mass Eid al-Fitr prayer in Sholakia in which four people were killed and seven wounded.

ISIS claimed responsibility for the killing of two people who converted from Islam to Christianity. In the first incident on January 7, Chhamir Uddin Mandal, an 85-year-old homeopathic doctor, was found in his office in Jhenaidah with stab wounds to the chest. In the second incident on March 22, Hussein Ali Sarkar, also a Christian convert, was hacked to death in Kuringram.

ISIS also claimed the June 30 killing using machetes of Buddhist farmer and local Awami League leader, Mong Shwe Lung Marma, in the Bandarban area.

ISIS claimed responsibility for the killing of Christian grocer, Sunil Gomez, in Baraigram on June 5.

ISIS claimed responsibility for a May 20 attack in which homeopathic doctor and Baul enthusiast (a disappearing style of folk song often performed by followers of Sufism) Sanaur Rahman and friend Saif uz Zaman were riding on a motorcycle when they were attacked by at least three men, also riding motorcycles. Rahman was killed while Zaman, a university professor, was seriously wounded. The attack took place in Kushtia in Khulna District.

ISIS claimed responsibility for killing an elderly Buddhist monk, Mong Shu You Chak, on May 14 in his monastery in Bandarban district.

On April 23, Professor Rezaul Karim Siddique was killed on his way to work in Rajshahi. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack and stated Siddique was killed for “calling others to atheism.” Siddique was reportedly Muslim and had founded a music school and was editor of a literary magazine – activities ISIS conflated with “atheism.”

On April 6, attackers claiming affiliation with AQIS used machetes to kill Nazimuddin Samad, a graduate law student at Jagannath University, whom they accused of “abusing God, the Prophet Muhammad, and Islam.” In February an unknown group released a list of bloggers to target. On April 13, AQIS released a video online claiming responsibility for past blogger killings and calling for “killing all those who slander and insult Prophet Muhammad.”

ISIS also claimed responsibility for the killing of a Shia preacher, Hadith Abdur Razzak, who was stabbed to death in Jhenaidah on March 14.

ISIS news agency Amaq claimed responsibility for an August 23 machete attack on a Hindu grocer, Chittaranjan Arjya, in Narsingdi District. Arjya survived the attack. He was a patron of Kali Temple, located next to his store.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Communal violence involving minority religious groups continued to result in deaths, injuries, and damage to property. Land disputes at times disproportionately affected religious minorities, particularly the Hindu community. Members of religious minorities also stated they experienced continued discrimination in employment and housing. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to the human rights NGO ASK, attacks targeting Hindus or their property during the year killed seven persons and injured 67, compared to none killed and 60 injured in 2015. Attackers destroyed 197 statues, monasteries, or temples compared to 213 in 2015; and destroyed 192 homes and 2 businesses compared to 104 homes and six businesses in 2015. The motivation for these incidents was often unclear.

On February 21, attackers in Panchagarh slit the throat of Jogeshwar Das Adhikari, a Hindu priest, and he was reported dead. The attackers reportedly threw homemade bombs as they escaped on motorcycles. Two witnesses also were injured.

The media reported that no one claimed responsibility for the May 6 killing of a Sufi Pir Mohammed Shahidullah, found hacked to death in the village of Tanore near Rajshahi. Police stated the attack resembled those of previous militant attacks, in which Sufis were targeted for their beliefs.

On January 9 in Naogaon District, authorities found the disfigured, partially burned body of a tribal Catholic killed by unknown attackers, according to media reports.

On July 2, three machete-wielding masked men assaulted Hindu priest Palash Chakrabarty in the Kishoreganj district northwest of Dhaka, but he fended off his attackers by striking them with an iron rod, according to Bangladeshi press. In a separate incident on July 2, Bhabashindhu Bar, a Hindu priest in Satkira was hospitalized in critical condition after assailants tried to hack him to death. On July 1, a masked individual with knives reportedly tried to enter the room of Hindu priest Babul Chakraborty in Bandarban. The individual fled when spotted by the priest's daughter in law. Media reported the incident as an "attempted murder."

In May media reported attackers threw six to seven crude bombs into the home of a family living in Western Chuadanga who had converted from Islam to Christianity, critically injuring one man.

Buddhist monk Tain Dima Bikkhu survived an attack at Dabonkhali Marma Para Buddhist Temple in Bandarban District on the evening of August 4. Four to five men wielding knives allegedly broke down the door to the temple, but Dima was able to ward them off by activating a loudspeaker and calling for help.

There were attacks against followers of the mystic/religious Baul practice. Several Baul followers, who reportedly lived together, survived another attack in Chuadanga on July 17. On July 30, media reported 22 to 25 men assaulted three members of the Baul faith again in Chuadanga. The attackers restrained the Baul followers for approximately 90 minutes, burned their *akhra* (religious structure) and literature, cut off their hair, and threatened to return to kill them and blow up their house if they continued their religious practice in the area.

There was communal violence against Hindus. On January 11, a crowd besieged a Hindu ashram and temple after a local imam and madrassah head claimed the adherents had burned copies of the Quran. Although the crowd did not damage the ashram and temple, unknown attackers set fire to the house of the Hindu man who was accused of burning the Quran.

Individuals continued to kill and threaten bloggers whom they accused of offending Islam. In May messaging on the website *Salauddiner Ghora* urged followers to behead five Bangladeshi bloggers living overseas for blasphemy against Islam. Many bloggers and activists reportedly continued to limit their

publications because of the ongoing threats. Some sought refuge in neighboring countries, including Nepal and Sri Lanka.

During local elections in June, violence reached unprecedented levels and members of religious minorities were attacked. In a suburb of Dhaka, media reported hundreds of attackers used sticks and bamboo poles to beat a group of Catholics and vandalize their homes and shops to stop them from voting for three Catholic candidates. An estimated 60 people, including 10 women, were injured in the attacks. Police later charged 25 people in the case and arrested four people in connection with the attacks. The suspects had reportedly been released on bail at year's end.

On October 30, 100 to 150 villagers in Nasirnagar in the eastern part of the country reacted violently to a Hindu resident's Facebook post showing a Hindu deity pasted over the Kaaba in Mecca. They vandalized 52 Hindu homes and 15 temples, injured more than 100 people, and set fire to eight shops during the Diwali holiday. The violence followed public rallies in the same area protesting the Facebook post by Muslim groups and local ruling party politicians. Law enforcement officials arrested 104 people in connection with the attack, and the National Human Rights Commission conducted a fact-finding mission which stated the attack was orchestrated to drive Hindus from the area to obtain their land. According to media accounts, the attacks on Hindu homes and temples resulted from acrimony between two factions of the local chapters of the ruling Awami League Party. The reports also stated some Hindu protesters blamed local current cabinet member Sayedul Haque for inciting violence and insulting Hindus. In January, October, and November, individuals destroyed idols and vandalized and looted Hindu temples in Gopalganj, Chittagong, Netrokona, and Barisal. Authorities arrested suspects, who were undergoing trial at the year's end. In a video conference on November 12, Prime Minister Hasina instructed field-level officials to ensure the security of members of minority groups.

NGOs continued to report tensions in the CHT between the predominantly Muslim Bengali settlers and members of indigenous groups, primarily Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian, largely over land ownership. The government worked to resolve land ownership disputes with an amendment to the existing law that provides for a more inclusive decision making and harmonization of the law with the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord. In Bandarban, an NGO stated that Muslim residents attempted to convert indigenous Christian and Hindu children to Islam.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy staff met with officials from the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Home Affairs as well as local government representatives to underscore the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. They discussed the interface between religion and violent extremism and the positive impact of respecting human rights and religious freedom in counterterrorism efforts. The embassy officials noted the importance of respecting religious minorities' viewpoints and protecting such minorities in the wake of violent extremist attacks on these groups.

During his visit to the country in December, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom stressed with government interlocutors the importance of upholding the country's tradition of religious tolerance and bringing perpetrators of attacks on religious minorities to justice. In meetings with government and civil society interlocutors, the Ambassador at Large highlighted the interdependence of the rights to freedoms of religion and expression and noted that restricting offensive speech for the purposes of maintaining public order was counterproductive.

Embassy officials also met with government officials to discuss protection and humanitarian assistance for the increasing numbers of Rohingya Muslims crossing into the country from Burma. The Ambassador, embassy officials, and the Ambassador at Large visited refugee camps and makeshift settlements in the southeastern part of the country to speak directly with Rohingya about their ability to pursue their religious practices. Embassy officials met with Buddhist groups in Cox's Bazar to learn about the status of their case for a 2012 attack on their temples. As part of community policing training, the embassy encouraged law enforcement officials to protect the rights of religious minorities.

Embassy and other U.S. government officials expressed support for religious minorities in public and private forums. During a March visit to the Hindu Dhakeshwari national temple, the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights expressed U.S. support for enforcement of laws ensuring protection of all religions. In January, February, March, October, and December, the Embassy hosted roundtable discussions with members of Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian minority groups, both individually and with multiple faiths represented, to discuss challenges faced by their respective communities. Embassy officials also met with Muslim leaders and groups to discuss the balance between countering violent extremism and religious freedom and the intersection of politics

and religion. Embassy officials met regularly with a wide range of religious organizations and representatives, some of the most prominent including the Saadi Foundation (a nonpolitical Islamic organization), the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, the Bangladesh Christian Association, Hindu Mohajote, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness – Bangladesh, the Christian Religious Welfare Trust, the apostolic nuncio, the Asian Conference of Religion and Peace Central Committee, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat (Bangladesh), the Bangladesh Purja Celebration Committee, Hotline Human Rights Bangladesh, and the Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities.

Embassy officials met regularly with a working group of 11 foreign missions to discuss assistance to secular bloggers under threat, including several bloggers stating their desire to take refuge in the United States. Many bloggers were able to identify means for increasing their personal protection using programs and resources identified by the embassy. During the Ambassador at Large's visit, the embassy convened heads of mission from countries participating in the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief to discuss coordination of efforts to address issues of concern, including impunity for perpetrators of violence against religious minorities.