European Bangladesh Forum

Voice of European Bangladeshis

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Dear Sir/Madam,

**Submission to Special Procedures: Protecting minority communities & secular activists of Bangladesh**

**Introduction**

In December 2018/January 2019 Bangladesh is set to hold its next general election but there is considerable political uncertainty with Bangladesh's two main parties – the ruling secular Awami League and the opposition BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) - failing to agree on an election process.

Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has proposed of forming an interim cabinet to supervise the election but BNP leader, Khaleda Zia, has threatened to boycott the elections if they are not held under a non-elected/non-party caretaker government.

Another key issue causing tension between the two main parties is the on-going war crimes trials of perpetrators of genocide in the 1971 War of Independence with Pakistan. Most of those on trial are linked to the Islamo fascist group Jamaat-e-Islami which is itself linked to the BNP.

**Background**

Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country. After the partition of India in 1947, the Hindu population became an endangered community in their motherland, Bangladesh. During the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, Hindus were one of the main targets of the killings and rape by the Pakistani military and their local militias. After independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the number of Hindus continued to dwindle due to persecution and oppression by the majority community. The Hindu community has faced large scale brutal attacks, including murder, rape, land grabbing and the destruction of temples by Islamist fanatics in 1991-1992, 2001-2002.

In recent years, with the rise of Islamism, atrocities against the Hindu minority community has increased to an ever more alarming rate. It should be mentioned with the secular alliance government led by Awami League that came to power in 2008 and the formation of International War Crimes Tribunal in 2010, attacks on Hindu minority has increased. Amnesty International in its 2013 report said, “the attacks come in the context of large-scale violent protests that have been raging across Bangladesh for weeks over the country’s ongoing war crimes tribunal, the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT)”.

Abbas Faiz, Amnesty International’s Bangladesh Researcher at the time said, “The Hindu community in Bangladesh is at extreme risk, in particular at such a tense time in the country. It is shocking that they appear to be targeted simply for their religion. The authorities must ensure that they receive the protection they need” (Amnesty International: 2013).

Human Rights Watch in its “World Report 2015: Bangladesh” stated, “Supporters of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Jamaat-e-Islami party threw petrol bombs to enforce strikes and economic blockades. Before and after the election (referring to 2014 election), the attackers also vandalized homes and shops owned by members of Bangladesh’s Hindu and Christian communities”.

This trend seems to be continuing as UK politician Bob Blackman MP, Chair of All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Hindus observed in a debate at the House of Commons on 8 September 2016. He said the widespread and persistent violations of human rights and the persecution of minority religious groups—Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and other tribal communities in Bangladesh—by the extremist armed groups are deeply worrying to all concerned within the country and in this country.

In addition, in recent times secular humanist bloggers, activists, publishers, university lecturers, members of minority community & foreign nationals have been systematically targeted by religious extremists in Bangladesh. Ananta Bijoy Das was murdered in 2015. He wrote blogs for Mukto-Mona, a website once moderated by US citizen Avijit Roy, himself hacked to death in February 2015. Ansar Al Islam, an insurgent group linked to Al-Qaeda, claimed responsibility for four of the killings in 2014, saying they had the “permission of Allah” and warning of further attacks. In October 2015 publisher Faisal Arefin Dipan was stabbed to death in the capital hours after assailants from another Islamist group knifed another publisher of the slain bloggers.  The Islamists have published a list of 84 bloggers whom they have accused of blasphemy and demanded they be punished. In this climate of violence, the bloggers/activists are hardly receiving any help or protection from the authorities and are living in constant fear for their lives.

**Context**

The rise of violent extremism and militancy not only in Bangladesh, but also in the South Asia region and the worldwide phenomenon of religious extremism as one of the greatest contemporary threats to global security that can lead to violence and terrorism, and which can permeate all sovereign borders. In today’s world, national and global security face their greatest threats from violent extremism and terrorism. In recent years, Bangladesh too has been subjected to increased threats from these dangers. Jamaat-e-Islami and other religion-based fundamentalist groups are responsible in radicalization youth both in Bangladesh and abroad. Different countries from the Middle East are also involved in financing these radical elements and organizations to destroy secularism.

**Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf**

Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf, Director of Research, South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF), Brussels.  states that Jamaat-e-Islami was responsible for the spread of violence and terrorism in Bangladesh and beyond. Jamaat-e-Islam is the ‘visible face of radical Islam in Bangladesh’.  Jamaat tries to replace parliamentary democracy and secularism with a theocratic Islamic state. Despite its electoral and political setbacks in recent past, Jamaat-e-Islam is already so deeply entrenched into the institutional system of governance and public sphere that it can continue to function – even without being in power – and build-up its Islamist network. It risks turning Bangladesh into a major hub of terrorist activities. Jamaat-e-Islam’s connection to Western based Jihadist organisations – namely in the UK – shows that it is not just a regional phenomenon, but also an important international player. The student wing of Jamaat-e-Islam, Islami Chattra Shibir has demonstrable links to domestic & international terrorist networks.  It interacts with well-known terrorist organisations like Harakat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami, among others. Islami Chattra Shibir supports the build-up and maintenance of infrastructure like training camps, provides places for stockpiling weapons and supplies, and recruits new members for a global Jihad.  Jamaatul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, a terrorist group in Bangladesh, originated from a faction of Jamaat-e-Islam and maintains close links with its senior members. Dr. Siegfried Wolf further adds, ‘Jihadist groups assumed a high profile during the BNP-Jamaat-e-Islam alliance government.  The BNP Jamaat-e-Islam government downplayed the existence of Islamist violence in the country and organisations – in particular those under the direct control of Jamaat – silenced reports of such violence and undermined the work of law enforcement agencies.  BNP-Jamaat-e-Islam government support for Jihadist violence also took the form of material and financial support and there was a veritable surge of foreign Jihadist NGOs registered in Bangladesh. Financial support to these organisations is well-documented,’.

Regarding attacks on the religious minorities in Bangladesh the SADF Research Director says, Jamaat-e-Islam targets Bangladesh’s Hindu-minority as part of its anti-India strategy.  This dates to the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 when Jamaat-e-Islam claimed that Awami League and the local Hindu community were Indian agents seeking to turn East Pakistan into a ‘Hindu state’. Members of Jamaat and Islami Chatra Shibir are conducting ‘large-scale orchestrated attacks on the homes, businesses and places of worship of minorities, as well as engaging in the abductions and forced conversions of Hindu girls. The violence also targets Christians and Buddhists.

**Jamaat-e-Islam & its agenda**

The irony of the history of Bangladesh is that a country created on the basis of secular democracy, most of the time it was ruled by pro-Islamist radical forces.  During the tenure of BNP-Jamaat-e-Islam led coalition government in 2001-2006 there was a mushroom growth of terrorism in Bangladesh. At least 125 Islamic militant outfits that we know more or less active were linked with Jamaat.

During 2001-2006 there has seen unprecedented persecution of religious minorities, mostly the Hindus.  In order to convert Bangladesh into a monolithic Muslim country BNP-Jamat-e-Islam alliance forced more than quarter million hapless Hindus to leave Bangladesh and take shelter in neighbouring India.

**Front Line Defenders**

In August 2016, Front Line Defenders conducted a research mission to Bangladesh to investigate the killings of HRDs, the government’s response to the attacks, and reports from HRDs regarding the denial of their requests for police protection.

Between February 2013 and June 2016, at least 14 human rights defenders (HRDs) and activists were murdered in Bangladesh. Local extremist groups pledging allegiance to Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent often claimed responsibility for the attacks, which have targeted HRDs who write about women’s rights, indigenous peoples’ rights, freedom of religion, and other human rights issues.

The government has so far failed to properly investigate most of the murders. What began in 2013 as an assault on bloggers sharing secular views and criticising the influence of fundamental Islam on Bangladeshi politics has become a lethal environment for HRDs who advocate for human rights- related reforms to which those pushing a fundamentalist Islamic agenda are opposed.

As a result of killings, impunity, and the authorities’ refusal to protect HRDs who report threats, more than 45 of the most prominent Bangladeshi human rights defenders and writers are now dead, in exile, or have ceased writing completely.

**Impact of Terrorism and what to do**

Call on the Government of Bangladesh to carry out immediate, thorough and impartial investigations into all killings of HRDs, and ensure that their colleagues and families are informed of the developments in the case.

Terrorism has no boundary thereby bilateral, regional and global cooperation is of paramount importance. Internet has brought the world jihadis close to each other. Threat originating from one country imploding in other has become common phenomenon. Radicalization is a future threat that all must fight together.

Support Bangladesh to promote civil society, economic and social development, humanitarian actions and the government’s attempts to eliminate the spread of ‘ideologies of hate’ should be strengthened in a well-informed and comprehensive way, taking into account of the realities on the ground. Only the promotion of a culture of tolerance is the way forward.

Yours faithfully



Ansar Ahmed Ullah

President

*The European Bangladesh Forum (EBF), a platform of Bengali diaspora in Europe. Its objects are to act as a common platform for European Bangladeshis and to act as a collective voice for the advancement of Bangladeshi community in Europe and Bangladesh. Furthermore, the European Bangladesh Forum will promote research & education on issues*