



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Bangladesh

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but provides for the right to profess, practice, or propagate--subject to law, public order, and morality--the religion of one's choice. It also states that every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain, and manage its religious institutions. While the Government publicly supported freedom of religion, attacks on religious and ethnic minorities continued to be a problem. Protests demanding that Ahmadis be declared non-Muslims and instances of harassment continued sporadically, but the Government generally acted in an effective manner to protect Ahmadis and their property and refused to give in to any of the protesters' demands. Religion exerted a powerful influence on politics, and the Government was sensitive to the Islamic consciousness of its political allies and the majority of its citizens.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Citizens were generally free to practice the religion of their choice; however, government officials, including the police, were often ineffective in upholding law and order and were sometimes slow to assist religious minority victims of harassment and violence. The Government and many civil society leaders stated that violence against religious minorities normally had political or economic motivations and could not be attributed only to religion.

The generally amicable relationships among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist minorities experienced discrimination and sometimes violence by the Muslim majority. Harassment of Ahmadis continued along with protests demanding that Ahmadis be declared non-Muslims.

During the period covered by this report, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in a four party coalition that included the Islamic parties Jamaat Islami and the Islami Okiyya Jote, led the Government. Hindus were traditionally viewed as Awami League (AL) supporters. In the 300-seat parliament, religious minorities held eight seats. The AL has a Christian, a Buddhist, and two Hindu MPs, and the BNP has three Hindu MPs. There was also a Hindu MP elected as an independent candidate. Three non-Muslims held deputy or state minister or equivalent positions in the Government. The acute animosity between the two mainstream political parties often led to politically motivated violence, and sometimes to heightened tensions between Muslims and Hindus.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In meetings with officials and in public statements, officers at the U.S. Embassy encouraged the Government to protect the rights of minorities. Government officials were particularly encouraged to take necessary measures to ensure minority rights for the election scheduled to be held in 2007. Publicly and privately, the embassy denounced acts of religious intolerance and called on the Government to ensure due process for all citizens. When two Christians working for a nongovernmental organization (NGO) were killed, the embassy issued a press release condemning the violence. The U.S. government sponsored the visit of a prominent U.S. Muslim cleric who spoke to audiences about Qur'anic interpretations that support tolerance and gender equity. In February 2006, U.S. Representative Joseph Crowley of New York visited places of worship belonging to several faiths and met with representatives of religious minorities to demonstrate support for religious diversity and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 55,126 square miles, and its population was 146 million. Sunni Muslims constituted 88 percent of the population. Approximately 10 percent of the population was Hindu. The remainder was mainly Christian (mostly Roman Catholic) and Theravada-Hinayana Buddhist. Ethnic and religious minority communities often overlapped and were concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and northern regions. Buddhists were found predominantly among the indigenous (non-Bengali) populations of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Bengali and ethnic minority Christians could be found in many communities across the country; in cities such as Barisal City, Gournadi (Barisal), Baniarchar in Gopalganj, Monipuripara in Dhaka, Christianpara in Mohakhali (Dhaka), Nagori in Gazipur. There also were small populations of Shi'a Muslims, Sikhs, Baha'is, animists, and Ahmadis. Estimates of their numbers varied from a few thousand to 100 thousand adherents for each faith. There was no indigenous Jewish community, nor a significant immigrant Jewish population in the country. There were no synagogues or other Jewish institutions.

Religion was an important part of community identity for citizens, including those who did not participate actively in prayers or services. A national survey in late 2003 confirmed that religion was the first choice by a citizen for self-identification; atheism was extremely rare.

The majority of "foreign residents" were returned Bangladeshi emigres. There were approximately 30 thousand Rohingya refugees, who practiced Islam. There was no reliable estimate of the number of missionaries, but several Christian denominations operated schools, orphanages, or other social programs throughout the country. A substantial number of Christian missionaries, primarily based in Dhaka and Chittagong, engaged in social development projects. Every year, the Tabliqui Muslim community holds the Biswa Itjema, the world's second largest gathering of Muslims. The Tabliqui came from all over the world, including the United States, but mostly from South and South East Asia. They worked with populations that were already Muslim and encouraged them to be more devout. Several faith-based NGOs, including

World Vision and Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) International, operated in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but provides for the right to practice, profess, and propagate--subject to law, public order, and morality--the religion of one's choice. While the Government publicly supports freedom of religion, attacks on religious and ethnic minorities continued to be a problem.

While the right to propagate the religion of one's choice is guaranteed by the constitution, local authorities and communities often objected to efforts to convert persons from Islam. Strong social resistance to conversion from Islam means that most missionary efforts by Christian groups were aimed at serving communities that have been Christian for several generations or longer. In 2006, a group of recent Christian converts from Buddhism built a church in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Buddhist members of the community, angry at the conversion and at the use of a disputed piece of land, set fire to the church. Investigation into the case continued.

In general, government institutions and the courts protect religious freedom. Traditionally there was little interference or regulation by the Government concerning Islamic practices. The Government ran imam training academies and proclaimed days of festivals but did not dictate sermon content, select or pay clergy, or closely monitored content of religious education in madrassahs.

Shari'a (Islamic law) was not implemented formally and was not imposed on non-Muslims but played an influential role in civil matters pertaining to the Muslim community. For instance, alternative dispute resolution was available to individuals for settling family disputes and other civil matters not related to land ownership. The arbitrator may rely on principles found in Shari'a for settling disputes, if both parties agree to the settlement. In addition, Muslim family law was loosely based on Shari'a.

In 2001, the high court ruled all fatwas--legal rulings based on Shari'a--illegal. In deeming all fatwas illegal, the high court intended to end the extrajudicial punishments and restrictions forced on local populations by religious leaders. However, the high court's decision prohibited all fatwas, which also included pronouncements on purely religious matters such as when festivals can begin or whether a marriage or divorce is valid from a religious standpoint. Several weeks later, the appellate court stayed the high court's ruling, stating that while the appeal was pending, the ban on fatwas could not be implemented. Given the heavy appellate court caseload, it was unclear when the appeal was expected to be considered.

Islamic tradition dictated that only those muftis (religious scholars) who have expertise in Islamic law were authorized to declare a fatwa. Village religious leaders sometimes made declarations in individual cases and called the declaration a fatwa. Sometimes this resulted in extrajudicial punishments, often against women, for their perceived moral transgressions.

Family laws concerning marriage, divorce, and adoption differed slightly depending on the religion of the persons involved. Each religion had its own set of family laws. Muslim men may marry up to four wives; however, a Muslim man must get his first wife's signed permission before taking a second wife. In contrast, Christian men may only marry one woman. Under Hindu law, unlimited polygamy is permitted and while there is no provision for divorce and legal separation, Hindu widows may legally remarry. There were no legal restrictions on marriage between members of different faiths.

Religion exerted a powerful influence on politics, and the Government was sensitive to the Muslim consciousness of its political allies, Jamaat Islami and the Islami Okiyya Jote, as well as the majority of its citizens.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs administered three funds for religious and cultural activities: the Islamic Foundation, the Hindu Welfare Trust, and the Buddhist Welfare Trust. According to the Government, the Christian community did not want government involvement in its religious affairs and requested that there not be any similar organization for their community; however, the Government recently told Christian leaders it would soon establish a welfare trust for Christians. At the end of the period covered by this report, the Hindu Welfare Trust had \$1.7 million (120 million taka). The trust was founded in the 1980s. This trust used its money to repair temples, modify cremation pyres, and help destitute Hindu families afford medical treatment; approximately \$29 thousand (2 million taka) went towards annual Puja celebrations. The Buddhist Welfare Trust, also founded in the 1980s, had a fund of \$425 thousand (30 million taka) at the end of the period covered by this report. Funds were used to repair monasteries, organize training programs for Buddhist monks, and celebrate the Buddhist festival Purnima. There have been no public criticisms of how the money is proportioned or distributed.

Major religious festivals and holy days of the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian faiths were celebrated as national holidays. The Bangladesh Christian Association lobbied unsuccessfully for the inclusion of Easter as a national holiday.

Religious organizations were not required to register with the Government; however, all NGOs, including religious organizations, were required to register with the Government's NGO Affairs Bureau if they receive foreign financial assistance for social development projects. The Government had the legal authority to cancel the registration of an NGO suspected to be in breach of its legal or fiduciary obligations and to take other actions, such as blocking foreign funds transfers, to limit its operation. In 2003 and 2004, the Government took action in a nontransparent manner against six NGOs perceived as anti-government or pro-opposition, temporarily closing one of them. This NGO subsequently reopened, and reported no additional government harassment. A prominent NGO had its outside grants blocked in 2001 after its director expressed concern over attacks on minorities. The leader of this NGO declared that although the Government agreed in principle to release the grants, by the end of the period covered by this report it had not released any funds. In the past, members of NGOs intending to travel to religious freedom events abroad reported pressure by law enforcement and intelligence officials to remain at home, but there were no reports of this occurring during the reporting period.

Religion was taught in government schools, and parents had the right to have their children taught in their own religion; however, some claimed that many government-employed religious teachers of minority religious groups were neither members of the religion they taught nor qualified to teach it. Although transportation was not always available for children to attend religion classes away from school, in practice schools with few religious minority students often worked out arrangements with local churches or temples, which then directed religious studies outside of school hours. There were at least 25 thousand Muslim religious schools, or madrassahs. Some madrassahs were government-funded and some were privately funded and run, according to a recent U.S. government study. There were no known government-run Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist schools.

The Government took steps to promote interfaith understanding. For example, government leaders issued statements on the eve of religious holidays calling for peace and warned that action would be taken against those attempting to disrupt the celebrations. Through additional security deployments and public statements, the Government promoted the peaceful celebration of Christian and Hindu festivals, including Durga Puja, Christmas, and Easter.

The Government supported the creation of the Council for Interfaith Harmony-Bangladesh, with a mandate to promote understanding and peaceful coexistence. This initiative came in response to a bombing campaign in the fall of 2005 by an Islamist extremist group seeking the imposition of Shari'a law.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Since 2004, anti-Ahmadiyya extremists have publicly demanded that the Government declare Ahmadis to be non-Muslims. The International Khatme Nabuwat Movement Bangladesh (IKNMB) and a splinter group, the Khatme Nabuwat Andolon Bangladesh (KNAB), first announced a January 2004 deadline, and in December 2005, again issued an ultimatum and threatened violent protests at Ahmadiyya mosques. The Government rejected the ultimatum and successfully kept protesters a safe distance from all Ahmadiyya buildings. On December 24, 2005, the *Daily Star* reported that State Minister for Religious Affairs, Mosharef Hossain Shajahan stated "There may be difference of opinion among the followers of a religion, but no one can attack others for such a difference." In June 2006, the KNAB announced a weeklong program including dawn to dusk hartals (strikes) near Dhaka and a shutdown of the airport to force the Government to declare Prophet Muhammad as the last prophet in the ongoing parliament session as a primary step in declaring Ahmadis non-Muslims. Using minimal force, police prevented the protests from approaching the Ahmadiyya facilities, and the KNAB's hartal program failed to materialize. The Ahmadiyya community complimented the Government for its responsiveness to their concerns and its professional handling of the protests.

The constitution provides for the right to profess, practice, or propagate any religion; however, proselytism was discouraged. Foreign missionaries were allowed to work, but as is the case with other foreign residents, they often faced delays of several months in obtaining or renewing visas. In the past, some missionaries who were perceived to be converting Muslims to other faiths were unable to renew their one-year religious worker visas. Some foreign missionaries reported that internal security forces and others closely monitored their activities.

On January 8, 2004, the Government announced a ban on all Ahmadiyya publications. The ban was not formalized, but in 2004, police detained a boy for three days for possession of Ahmadiyya books, and during demonstrations in April and May 2004, police entered two Ahmadiyya mosques and seized documents. In December 2004 the Government prepared a statement banning Ahmadiyya publications but did not release it. After local human rights activists and Ahmadiyya leaders challenged this statement, the high court stayed the ban, making it unenforceable until the court ruled on it. The Government opposed court challenges to the ban on the grounds the ban had not been promulgated officially and was, therefore, beyond judicial scrutiny. With a few exceptions, police respected the high court's order.

There were no financial penalties imposed on the basis of religious beliefs; however, religious minorities were disadvantaged in access to military and government jobs, including elected office. While the Government has appointed some Hindus to senior civil service positions at the deputy secretary, joint secretary and secretary levels, religious minorities remained underrepresented, especially at the higher ranks. One notable exception was the government-owned Bangladesh Bank, which employed approximately 10 percent non-Muslims in its upper ranks. Selection boards for government services often lacked minority representation. Employees were not required to disclose their religion, but it generally could be determined by a person's name.

Religious minorities were not underrepresented in the private sector. Some Hindus reported that Muslims tended to prefer hiring Hindus for some professional positions, such as doctors, lawyers, teachers and accountants. They attributed this circumstance to the education that the British offered during the nineteenth century, which Muslims boycotted but Hindus embraced.

Many Hindus have been unable to recover landholdings lost because of discrimination under the now-defunct Vested Property Act. The act was an East Pakistan-era law that allowed "enemy" (in practice Hindu) lands to be expropriated by the Government. Approximately 2.5 million acres of land were seized from Hindus, and almost all of the 10 million Hindus in the country were affected. In April 2001, parliament passed the Vested Property Return Act, stipulating that land remaining under government control that was seized under the Vested Property Act be returned to its original owners, provided that the original owners or their heirs remained resident citizens. The Government was required to prepare a list of vested property holdings by October 2001, and claims were to have been filed within ninety days of the publication date. In 2002, parliament passed an amendment to the Vested Property Return Act, which allowed the Government unlimited time to return the vested properties and gave control of the properties, including the right to lease them, to local government employees. By the end of the period covered by this report, the Government had not prepared a list of such properties.

Marriage rituals and proceedings were governed by the family law of the religion of the parties concerned; however, marriages were also registered with the state. Under the Muslim Family Ordinance, female heirs inherit less than male relatives, and wives have fewer divorce rights than husbands. Although men were permitted to have up to four wives, society strongly discourages polygamy, and it was rarely practiced. Laws provide some protection for women against arbitrary divorce and the taking of additional wives by husbands without the first wife's consent, but the protections generally apply only to registered marriages. In rural areas, marriages sometimes were not registered because of ignorance of the law. Under the law, a Muslim husband was required to pay his former wife alimony for three months, but this law

was not always enforced. There was little societal pressure to enforce it, and the courts were so backlogged it was difficult, if not impossible, to get redress through the courts. There were separate family laws on the books for Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, based on their respective traditions with few significant differences. The major exception was that Hindu law permits unlimited polygamy and makes no provision for divorce or separation, which are forbidden according to the Hindu religion.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Reports of BNP harassment, violence and rape of Hindus, who many believed supported the AL, preceded and followed the 2001 election. The high court ordered the Government to report on these attacks and to demonstrate that it was taking adequate steps to protect religious minorities. The Government submitted its report to the high court in 2002, claiming that incidents of post-election violence were not connected to communal relations and that some reports of violence were fabricated or exaggerated. Since then, neither the high court nor the Government has taken further action. There was no religiously related political violence during any by-election during the period covered by this report.

Since the 2001 elections, attacks on religious minorities have led to the routine posting of law enforcement personnel during major religious festivals and events, since festivals tend to attract large congregations that make easy and more attractive targets. Reported incidents included killings, rape, torture, attacks on places of worship, destruction of homes, forced evictions, and desecration of items of worship. These claims continued during the period covered by this report; however, many such reports could not be verified independently, and there were incidents of members of the Muslim community attacking each other on holidays as well, due to a perception that some events were un-Islamic. The Government sometimes failed to investigate the crimes and prosecute the perpetrators, who were often local gang leaders.

Feminist author Taslima Nasreen remained abroad during the period covered by this report, while criminal charges were pending against her for allegedly insulting the religious beliefs of the country's Muslims. In October 2002 a court sentenced Nasreen, in absentia, to a year in jail for her "derogatory remarks about Islam," in a case filed by a local Jamaat-e-Islami leader in 1999. Her books remained banned but were openly sold on street corners.

As of the writing of this report, no charges have been filed in the 2003 case of eleven members of a Hindu family burned to death after assailants set fire to their home near the port city of Chittagong. BDG officials ascribed the crime to robbers following a failed robbery attempt, but the opposition AL alleged that BNP members attacked the family as part of a local anti-Hindu cleansing effort. Within a month of the attack, police arrested five persons, three of whom confessed to the magistrate and claimed that fourteen persons were involved in what they stated was an attempted robbery. Police have twice submitted their investigations to court but the public prosecutor has declared the investigations "faulty," so a third round of investigation was in process.

At the end of the reporting period, it was unknown what happened to the evicted families in the June 22, 2005 eviction of sixty-five families from their land by government officials to establish a government project in the same place. According to press reports, the evicted families consisted of fifteen families from the indigenous Santali Christian community and fifty Hindu families.

The Daily Sangbad reported that on October 20, 2005, a Hindu teacher, Srabani Sur, was dismissed after being accused of allegedly insulting Islam. She submitted an appeal to the education board claiming the allegations were false.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Persecution by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religious groups by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report. However, the banned extremist group Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) attacked a variety of government and civil society targets in late 2005 on the grounds they supported secular governance. Earlier in 2005, JMB attacked a Bangladeshi NGO for promoting un-Islamic practices, such as teaching women to run businesses and extending microcredit, in rural areas; however, these attacks were almost all on other Muslims. The fact that one of two judges JMB killed in Jalakhathi was Hindu was scarcely noted and was never cited by JMB as a reason for his killing.

There have been no significant developments in the cases of the 2004 injury of the British high commissioner in a bomb explosion as he visited the Shahjalal Shrine. In February 2005, there were several explosions at Muslim shrines in the Sylhet area.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government continued not to enforce the ban on Ahmadiyya publications. Furthermore, protesters were generally stopped from hanging signs outside of Ahmadiyya mosques declaring them nonmosques or threatening the lives or property of Ahmadis. This contrasted sharply from previous years, when police sometimes facilitated the hanging of such signs.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Relations between religious communities generally were amicable. Persons who practiced different religions often joined each other's

festivals and celebrations such as weddings. Shi'a Muslims practiced their faith without interference from Sunnis. Nevertheless, clashes between religious groups occasionally occurred. Violence directed against religious minority communities continued to result in the loss of lives and property, but the motives--religious animosity, criminal intent, or property disputes--were often unclear. Religious minorities were vulnerable due to their relatively limited influence with political elites. Like many citizens, they were often reluctant to seek recourse from a corrupt and ineffective criminal justice system. Police were often ineffective in upholding law and order and were sometimes slow to assist religious minorities. This promotes an atmosphere of impunity for acts of violence against them.

In September 2003, Ibrahim Khali and Dulal were sentenced to life in prison for raping a Hindu woman. Both convicts were serving their terms while their appeals were pending. In October 2003, a Speedy Trial Court sentenced six persons to life in prison and acquitted a seventh person accused of raping a Hindu woman after the 2001 parliament election in the Sadar sub-district of Bhola. The convicts appealed the verdict to the high court; the appeal was pending at the end of the period covered by this report while those convicted were serving their sentences.

Attacks against the Hindu community at the hand of societal actors continued. An NGO reported that during the period from December 1, 2004 to November 2005, there were 52 killings, 78 attacks on Hindu temples, 29 kidnappings, and 161 incidents of assault, theft, looting, or intimidation.

There were no new developments in the February 2004 case of Humayun Azad, a Muslim Dhaka University professor who sustained serious injuries when unidentified assailants stabbed him near campus. The Government never identified the assailants. Azad died of a heart attack in Germany in 2004.

There were unconfirmed reports that in September 2005, twelve indigenous Hindu cobblers from the Chandpur Village were evicted. Reportedly, a Kwami madrassah was built on the land.

According to one NGO, on October 15, 2005, the "Ma Kali Mandir" Temple in Patuakhali was forcefully occupied, and its Hindu priest was physically assaulted. Reportedly, the temple then was turned into a madrassah.

On October 15, 2005, approximately 200 Hindu families were attacked and 10 houses burned down in Majhipara Village. Reportedly, ten persons were injured and the local temple was vandalized. Police were sent to the site and arrested five persons.

On October 25, 2005, Gopal Chandra Braman, a Hindu priest in the Narsingdi District was killed after being kidnapped on October 18.

According to a press report, in December 2005, two Hindus were killed and ten others were injured when a Hindu majority village in Dhubaura sub-district was attacked by a land grabber. Police intervened and arrested the perpetrator.

On December 31, 2005, a Hindu village in Brahmanbaria was attacked after an announcement was made at the village mosque. Reportedly, five homes were damaged and two men were injured as a result of the attack.

Two newspapers reported on March 16, 2006, that a group of approximately eighteen persons attacked six Hindu families and injured ten individuals in the District of Satkhira while demanding a large sum of money due to a land dispute. When the owner of the land refused to pay, the attackers physically assaulted him.

Reports of harassment and violence against the Christian community were recorded during the reporting period.

Unconfirmed reports indicated that in July 2005, Grace Presbyterian Bible College in Khulna was moved to a different location after the school was attacked three times.

In July 2005, according to press reports, four Christian-owned stores were burned down in the Barisal area. Police arrested five persons in connection with the arson case. It was not clear if the crimes were religiously motivated.

On July 27, 2005, two Bangladeshi Christian NGO workers were killed in Boalmari, Faridpur. They worked primarily in the areas of arsenic poisoning, mother and child healthcare, and AIDS prevention, but they also showed religious films with the permission of the villagers. A week before the attack, the NGO workers were reportedly threatened by local leaders angry at their attempts to convert local persons to Christianity. Two men were arrested for the killings.

On April 2, 2006, local newspapers reported that arsonists burned down a church in the remote village of Lambopara in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, apparently in retaliation for conversion of local Buddhists to Christianity. There were no arrests in this case.

Human rights groups and press reports indicated that vigilantism against women accused of moral transgressions occurred in rural areas, often under a fatwa, and included punishments such as whipping. During 2005 religious leaders issued thirty-five fatwas, demanding punishments ranging from lashings and other physical assaults to shunning by family and community members.

There were approximately 100 thousand Ahmadis concentrated in Dhaka and several other locales. While mainstream Muslims rejected some of the Ahmadiyya teachings, the majority supported Ahmadis right to practice without fear or persecution. However, Ahmadis continued to be subject to harassment and violence from those who denounced their teachings.

In the latter part of 2003, Ahmadis were the targets of attacks and harassment prompted by clerics and leaders of the Islami Okiyya Jote. In October 2003, seventeen Ahmadiyya families in Kushtia were barricaded in their homes for several days. In November 2003, police stopped

a mob of approximately 5 thousand attempting to destroy an Ahmadiyya mosque in Tejgaon, Dhaka. In December 2003, anti-Ahmadi activists killed a prominent Ahmadi in Jessore. There were no results from the subsequent police investigations in any of these cases.

Throughout 2004, the police provided minimal protection to Ahmadiyya communities facing harassment. In April 2004, twelve Ahmadiyya houses were destroyed and fifteen Ahmadi in Rangpur reportedly were held against their will and pressed to renounce their faith. In May 2004, Khatme Nabuwat Andolon Bangladesh reportedly threatened to evict thousands of Ahmadi from their homes and destroy their mosques in Patuakhali, Rangpur, and Chittagong. In October 2004, an anti-Ahmadi mob injured eleven Ahmadi in an attempt to seize a mosque. No legal action was taken against these alleged assailants. The situation continued through the beginning of 2005.

In March 2005, a mob attempted to lay siege to a mosque in the town of Bogra, hoping to remove the "Ahmadi Mosque" sign. Police controlled the mob but removed the sign. After a few hours, police put the sign back up. In April 2005, there was a spate of IKNMB attacks on Ahmadi, including one in the Shatkira District where protesters injured more than fifty persons after hanging a new sign on an Ahmadi mosque.

On July 18, 2005, extremists allegedly vandalized the construction site of an Ahmadiyya mosque in the Uttara section of Dhaka. The police promptly intervened.

In December 2005, IKNMB and KNAB again issued an ultimatum that the Government declare Ahmadi non-Muslims. When the Government refused, the groups staged a protest near the Dhaka Ahmadiyya complex, but police successfully kept the protesters away from the Ahmadi and their property. Approximately fifty protesters and seven police officers were injured.

In January 2006, villagers in Shahbazpur protested when Ahmadi in their community attempted to bury an Ahmadi woman who died of old age in the Muslim cemetery. Police and local leaders intervened but ultimately gave into the villagers' demands. Local government leaders gave a small plot of publicly owned land to the Ahmadi to use for the burial.

In June 2006, the KNAB again issued demands that the Government declare Ahmadi non-Muslims and on June 23, 2006, approximately 1,500 to 2,000 marchers attempted to seize an Ahmadiyya mosque near Dhaka. In response, police quickly deployed approximately 3 thousand police to prevent violence and prevent the protest from approaching the Ahmadiyya complex. KNAB supporters then attempted to block access to Dhaka-Zia International Airport but were stopped by the police. Some ten to twenty persons were injured as a result. Following the KNAB's failure to seize the mosque, the group announced a dawn-to-dusk hartal and added the demand that parliament pass a law declaring Prophet Muhammad as the last Prophet; however, the hartal threat never materialized.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with officials at all levels of the Government as well as with political party leaders and representatives of religious and minority communities. During the period covered by this report, the embassy emphasized the importance of free and fair elections in early 2007, with a goal of averting the violence religious minorities experienced in 2001. Embassy staff traveled to regions of the country where violence was worst in 2001 and met with civil society members, NGO leaders, members of parliament, and other citizens to discuss concerns about violence during the next election and to encourage law enforcement to take proactive measures to protect the rights of minorities.

Embassy and visiting U.S. government officials regularly visited members of minority communities to hear their concerns and demonstrate support. During his February 2006 visit, U.S. Representative Joseph Crowley of New York visited Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Ahmadiyya houses of worship, to discuss religious freedom concerns and support the minority communities. He also discussed the importance of an election free from communal violence.

Following the death of two Christian NGO workers in Boalmari, Faridpur, the embassy issued a press release stating that religious freedom was a basic constitutionally guaranteed right, and it was important that the Government and civil society work effectively to safeguard this right.

The embassy assisted U.S. Christian-affiliated relief organizations in guiding paperwork for approval of schools and other projects through government channels. The Government has been receptive to the discussion of such subjects and generally helpful in resolving problems. The embassy has also acted as an advocate in the Home Ministry for these organizations in resolving problems with visas.

The embassy encouraged the Government through the Ministry for Religious Affairs to develop and expand its training program for Islamic religious leaders. After an initial pilot program, the U.S. government provided, among other topics, course work for religious leaders on human rights and gender equality. The U.S. government sponsored the visit of a prominent Muslim cleric from Georgetown University to talk to Bangladeshi audiences. He spoke to both small roundtables and to thousands at Friday prayers at the national mosque about Qur'anic interpretations that support tolerance and gender equity.

During the reporting period, the U.S. government continued to make religious freedom, especially the problems facing the Ahmadiyya community, a point of discussion in meetings with government officials. Embassy officers continued to visit the Ahmadiyya headquarters in Dhaka to show support for their security and religious freedom.

The embassy continued to encourage Jamaat Islami to reiterate publicly its position that it supports tolerance and minority rights in the context of an attack on a religious minority member. Democracy and governance projects supported by the United States included tolerance and minority rights components.

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