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Bangladesh: The situation of Hindus; the availability of state protection and of internal relocation (2004 - 2006)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Situation of Hindus in Bangladesh

Approximately 88 per cent of the population of Bangladesh is Muslim, while 10 per cent is Hindu (IDMC 28 Mar. 2006, 10; AP 9 Oct. 2005; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 1). The remaining two per cent of the country's population is largely Christian or Buddhist (ibid.; AP 9 Oct. 2005). According to a 2002 *Human Rights Features Quarterly* article, there are Hindu-dominated areas in the districts of Barisal, Bhola, Pirojpur, Satkhira, Jessore, Khulna, Kushtia, Jhenidah, Bagerhat, Feni, Tangail, Noakhali, Natore, Bogra, Sirajganj, Munshiganj, Narayanganj, Narsingdi, Brahmanbaria, Gazipur and Chittagong (HRDC Jan.-Mar. 2002).

Traditionally, most Hindus in Bangladesh have supported the Awami League (AL) party (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005; see also IDMC 28 Mar. 2006, 12). According to the *International Religious Freedom Report 2005*, the "acute animosity" between the AL and the ruling Bangladesh National Party (BNP), "often leads to politically motivated violence and sometimes heightened societal tensions between Muslims and Hindus" (8 Nov. 2005; see also Freedom House 6 July 2005). The BNP came to power after October 2001 elections, heading a coalition that includes two Islamic parties (Freedom House 6 July 2005).

Since the 2001 election, religious minorities have been targets of violence (IDMC 28 Mar. 2006, 7; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; Freedom House 6 July 2005). According to human rights sources, the attacks have targeted Hindus in particular (ibid.; IDMC 28 Mar. 2006, 7). From 2005 to 2006, reported incidents against Hindus have included rape (ibid.; ACHR 7 Sept. 2005; HRW Jan. 2006; Freedom House 6 July 2005; BHBCOP Apr. 2006); "torture" (ibid.; ACHR 7 Sept. 2005; *Prothom Alo* 17 Aug. 2005; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2); killings (ibid.; *The Daily Star* 27 Jan. 2006; Freedom House 6 July 2005; *Mayer Dak* 2005; UN 27 Mar. 2006, para. 39); kidnappings (ibid.; Freedom House 6 July 2005); land grabbing (ACHR 7 Sept. 2005; IDMC 28 Mar. 2006, 7; *The Daily Star* 27 Jan. 2006) and forced evictions (Freedom House 6 July 2005; IDMC 28 Mar. 2006, 7; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; HRW Jan. 2006; BHBCOP Apr. 2006); and the destruction of Hindu temples and/or religious icons (ibid.; ACHR 7 Sept. 2005; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; *Mayer Dak* 2005). Allegedly, some of these attacks were carried out by BNP supporters (BHBCOP Apr. 2006; US May 2005, 125) and Islamic "extremists" (ibid.; HRDC Jan.-Mar.

2002; AI 23 May 2006; *Mayer Dak* 2005; Freedom House 6 July 2005).

In October 2005, five people were seriously injured when Hindu temples and houses were set on fire in Rangpur District (AI 23 May 2006). In the same month, a Hindu temple in Chagarachi District was attacked and its priest, Shri Gopal Chandra Barman, was kidnapped (UN 27 Mar. 2006, para. 39). His body was later found in a nearby river, stabbed and bound with rope (ibid.).

In 2005, there were also reports of threats against Hindu journalists (RSF 27 Dec. 2005; CPJ 8 Sept. 2005; *The Washington Times* 22 Oct. 2005). Islamic groups reportedly sent letters to several journalists warning them that, as non-Muslims, they should not be reporting on Islamic affairs (ibid.; RSF 27 Dec. 2005; see also CPJ 8 Sept. 2005).

State protection

Although Bangladesh acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN 9 June 2004), the country reportedly does little to protect the rights of the Hindu population (IDMC 28 Mar. 2006, 7; HRW Jan. 2006; *The Daily Star* 27 Jan. 2006). According to human rights monitors, attacks on religious minorities, including Hindus, are carried out with "apparent impunity" (AI 23 May 2006; ACHR 7 Sept. 2005; US May 2005; see also *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2). A 2006 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report states that police have refused to investigate certain reports of rape of Hindu girls (Jan. 2006). According to the 2005 *Annual Report* of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the Bangladesh government downplayed reports of attacks on Hindus and other minorities following the October 2001 elections (US May 2005, 125; ACHR 7 Sept. 2005). The USCIRF report further notes that

[t]he lack of accountability for reported crimes against minority group members during the last election raises serious concerns about an atmosphere of impunity for such crimes, as well as the possibility of a renewal of violence against Hindus and members of other religious minorities in the next general election (US May 2005, 125).

Bangladesh's next elections are expected to take place in January 2007 (BBC 14 June 2006).

In January 2006, an article in *The Daily Star* reported that land grabbers had killed two Hindus and injured several others, while the authorities appeared to be "turning a blind eye to the gory incident" (27 Jan. 2006). A June 2004 article by OneWorld, an online civil society network (OneWorld n.d.), suggests that land grabbers have confiscated Hindu property with the assistance of corrupt authorities (14 June 2004).

Many Hindus have reportedly been discriminated against under Bangladesh's obsolete Vested Property Act (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; OneWorld 14 June 2004). The Act allowed the government to confiscate the property of "enemies of the state" (ibid.; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2). According to the OneWorld article, the law has been misused by land grabbers and corrupt officials by "identifying Hindus as 'enemies of the state'" (OneWorld 14 June 2004). Although the Act was repealed in 2001, many Hindus have been unable to recover their property (ibid.; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2). The *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* states

Hindus who fled to India and resettled there are not eligible to have their land returned, and the act does not provide for compensation for or return

of properties that the Government has sold. By law, the Government was required to prepare a list of vested property holdings by October 2001, and claims were to have been filed within 90 days of the publication date. However, by the end of ... [2005], the Government had not published the list of vested properties; the reasons for the extended delay could not be determined (8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2).

Reports of forced evictions of Hindus and land grabbing continued in 2005 and 2006 (IDMC 28 Mar. 2006, 7, 13-14; HRW Jan. 2006; *The Daily Star* 27 Jan. 2006; US May 2005, 125).

A 9 October 2005 Associated Press (AP) article reports that the Bangladesh police and paramilitary tightened security measures at Hindu temples across the country during the major Hindu festival of Durga Puja, following an attack on a Hindu temple in the Chittagong district. The 2005 Hindu festival coincided with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan (AP 9 Oct. 2005).

No further information on state protection available to Hindus in Bangladesh could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Availability of internal relocation

In its 2006 profile of the internal displacement situation in Bangladesh, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) indicates that a growing number of religious minorities have moved from rural to urban centres or sought "safer places" to live with relatives (28 Mar. 2006, 13). Information on specific locations in Bangladesh to which Hindus have relocated could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

According to a *Bangladesh Observer* article cited in *Human Rights Features Quarterly*, post-election attacks on the Hindu community in Bangladesh's Barisal district in 2001 resulted in thousands of Hindus fleeing to Gopalganj (HRDC Jan.-Mar. 2002). Gopalganj is the electoral district of Sheik Hasina (ibid.; LCG Bangladesh n.d.), leader of the Awami League (BBC 20 Apr. 2006).

Hundreds of thousands of Hindus have reportedly fled Bangladesh for neighbouring India (HRDC Jan.-Mar. 2002; see also HRW Jan. 2006 and IDMC 28 Mar. 2006, 13), where the predominant religion is Hinduism (US 20 July 2006).

No further information on the availability of internal relocation for Hindus in Bangladesh could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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