

Bangladesh

ANNUAL

HUMAN RIGHTS

REPORT 2014

Second Edition



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10 years



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Acknowledgements

This report has been produced with the financial assistance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. The content of this report is the sole responsibility of Global Human Rights Defence and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

This report would not have been possible without the support of our local partners in Bangladesh.

Global Human Rights Defence

GHRD is an international human rights organisation dedicated to promoting and protecting the rights of minorities. GHRD aims to specifically address those areas and populations in South Asia where severe and extensive human rights violations of certain indigenous people, sexual and religious minorities have taken place for long periods, and where structural help and global attention of the international media have proven to be absent or insufficient.

Our activities are focused on human rights monitoring, advocacy, education and empowerment.

GHRD operates in several South Asian countries, namely: Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, as well as in Europe, including the Netherlands.

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Executive Summary

GHRD collects information from various (local and international) human rights organisations and media sources to monitor the human rights of minorities in Bangladesh. In this report we provide an overview of the current situation as it affects minorities in the country and highlight human rights violations committed against the minority groups in 2014. For Bangladesh's minorities, be they religious, ethnic, gender or sexual, 2014 was a year filled with land grabbing, acts of vandalism, desecration, abductions and forced conversions and sexual and physical violence. Even those standing up to protect minorities are becoming victims themselves; being a Human Rights Defenders is almost as dangerous as being part of a minority group in Bangladesh.

GHRD is deeply concerned about the prevailing situation of the minorities in Bangladesh. The concern for the situation of these groups is shared with different national and international authorities, who have also expressed their concerns regarding their situation.

A lack of political will and the failure of the Government to create and implement legislative measures to protect these marginalised groups makes the state a contributor to the existing problem. Repressive traditions and customs further exacerbate the marginalisation of minorities. Minority groups in Bangladesh continue to live in an environment of constant fear amid the growing tensions in the country.

The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law. United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups, and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders): Article 1. Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels. United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups, and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders): Article 12(2). The State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration.

Country Profile

Basic Facts

Official name	: People's Republic of Bangladesh
Form of government	: Parliamentary Democracy
Capital	: Dhaka
Largest city	: Dhaka
Official language(s)	: Bangla
Area	: 130, 170 sq km
Population	: 158, 580, 822
Population density	: 1,203
Population growth	: 1,2%
Life expectancy	: 71 years
Literacy rate	: 59%
Gross Domestic Products	: \$150,0 billion

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and World Bank

Map



Political Developments in 2014

NATIONAL ELECTIONS 2014

The 2014 parliamentary elections were marked as the most violent in Bangladesh's history. Hundreds were killed and injured due to several months of political violence. The tension between the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the existing Awami League (AL) Government grew after both parties strongly disagreed on electoral arrangements. An 18-party opposition alliance led by BNP claimed that the electoral arrangements were inadequate to hold free and fair elections. As a result, the opposition alliance organised nationwide strikes, rallies and traffic blockades, which turned violent with opposition supporters throwing petrol bombs at vehicles that did not comply with blockades, attacking security forces and looting shops. In response, the AL Government carried out a brutal crackdown on the opposition and its supporters.

Furthermore, the 2014 elections-related political attacks were especially brutal towards the minority communities of Bangladesh, particularly Hindus. During and after the elections the Hindu community, who are traditionally known to be supporters of the AL, suffered from attacks against their places of worship and property, and physical assaults. The Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat) and BNP supporters, from the Muslim majority, were allegedly responsible for some of the attacks against Hindus in various locations in the country. On polling day and in subsequent weeks, Hindu minorities were targeted by Jamaat members simply for having cast their vote.

In the northern districts, where most religious minorities are concentrated, Hindu families were attacked, their homes torched and their businesses destroyed. Members of Bangladesh's Christian community were also attacked with estimates up to 700 people affected (Costa, Anam, 2014). Some community leaders, NGO staff and journalists have suggested that some attacks were primarily motivated by land and property disputes, but were facilitated by the outbreak of political violence (Allchin, 2014). The most serious attacks against Hindus mainly occurred in the Chittagong, Dhaka, Khulna, Rangpur, Rajshahi and Barisal districts.

The 18-party alliance boycotted the elections after their demand for the reinstatement of a neutral caretaker government to organise the polls was rejected. The boycott and related violence that engulfed the country led to record low voter turnout. More than half of the parliamentary seats were left uncontested, resulting in the AL winning a majority of seats. The AL Government and the opposition BNP bear responsibility for the escalated violence which tarnished the parliamentary elections. While the AL justified its victory claiming that they had conducted a constitutionally necessary election, the BNP rejected the poll results and called the new Government "illegal". While the previous elections in Bangladesh were celebrated with a pretty diffused fanfare, these last polls were marked by bloodshed.



“The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.”

– Bangladesh Constitution Art. 28(1)

Bangladesh’s Minorities

Bangladesh’s minorities are defined based on their ethnicity, culture, religion and linguistic characteristics. Although there is no internationally agreed upon definition of minorities, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Minorities 1992 defined minorities as vulnerable and marginalised groups whose members share ethnic, religious or linguistic identities which differ from the majority of the population (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2010). Minorities face discrimination due to their group characteristics, which places them in a vulnerable position in society. These characteristics are not limited to ethnicity, religion or language. Sexual orientation and gender identity, when used as grounds for discrimination by the Bangladesh Government and society, also classify a person as a minority group member among the majority population. Bangladeshi minorities generally share a communal identity or experiences, while certain groups also share a common recorded history. Some of the minority groups are clustered in distinct areas, others are scattered in different districts.

RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

According to the 2011 census report for Bangladesh, religious minorities make up approximately 10% of the total population. Hindus make up for 9% of the population, while Christians and Buddhists contribute less than 1% (BBS, 2011). There are also minority groups that are relatively smaller, consisting of less than 100,000 followers per group, including Shias, Bahais Ahmadiyyas and Animists.

Hindus are the largest religious minority group in Bangladesh. They are scattered throughout the different districts of Bangladesh, with high concentrations in the border regions of Dinajpur, Thakurgaon, Moulvibazar, Satkhira and Bagerhat (ASK, 2014). Hindus have been subjected to attacks and discriminatory practices due to their marginalised position in society and the perpetrators of these acts largely remain unpunished. Since the independence of Bangladesh, the protracted human rights crisis faced by Hindus

has not been properly addressed by successive governments. According to the 1951 census for East Bengal, which became modern day Bangladesh, Hindus made up 22% of the total population. The Hindu population has been decreasing over the years due to pervasive and systematic human rights violations faced by the group (Hill, Seltzer, Leaning, Malik, Russell, 2005).

Christians are mostly concentrated in Barisal, Khulna and Gazipur districts and are found among the indigenous and Bengali populations. Buddhists are predominately based in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and the northern districts (Hill et al, 2005). Buddhists mainly come from indigenous populations such as Chakma, Marma and other Jumma people. Christians and Buddhists also suffer from discrimination and violence based on their beliefs.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The population of Bangladesh is predominantly made up of Muslim people of Bengali origin. However, the country cannot be considered ethnically or religiously homogenous. According to the 2011 Census, approximately 1.6 million of the 143.3 million inhabitants belong to indigenous communities, which is equivalent to 1.8% of the total population of Bangladesh. However, the indigenous peoples themselves assert that their population is estimated at approximately two or three million people. Despite the lack of clarity regarding their actual number, indigenous peoples form a definitive minority. Besides having different ethnic origins compared to the Bengali majority, the customs of indigenous peoples generally vary across different indigenous communities (Quader, 2008).

The indigenous peoples consist of 54 different ethnic groups who speak around 26 different languages (D'Costa, 2014). Ethnic groups are situated in the CHT in the south-eastern border region with India and Myanmar, although the plain lands also have a vast number of indigenous people living in the north-west (Rajshahi-Dinajpur), the north (Mysmensing-Tangail), the north-east (Greater Sylhet), the south and the south-east (Dhamai, 2006). The Santal is the most populous indigenous community (200,000), followed by the Chakma (195,000), Marma (66,000), Mandi (60,000), the Tripura, the Tanchangya, the Mro, the Lushai, the Khumi, the Chak, the Khyang, the Bawm and the Pankhua (Adivasis). 11 of these indigenous ethnic groups are collectively known as “Jumma”, and have been living in the CHT for centuries. The Santal are the main group in the plain lands and are living side-by-side with, among others, the Garo, the Hajong Koch, the Manipuri, the Khasi and the Takhain peoples (Chowdhury, 2014; Hossain, 2013, p:22-30; Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact, 2007).

Recognition of indigenous people

Indigenous peoples currently are not recognised as “indigenous” by the Government of Bangladesh, nor by the Constitution (Dhamai and Drong, 2014; Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact, 2007). Prior to the 15th Amendment of the Constitution in 2011, the indigenous groups made an effort to become constitutionally recognised as indigenous peoples or Adivasi. However, the amended Constitution was passed without an acknowledgement of their identity. The current Constitution mentions several other phrases such as tribes

(upajati), minor races (khudro jatishaotta), ethnic sects and communities (nrigoshthi o shomprodai), but these terms do not do justice to the identity of the indigenous peoples. Moreover, the Article 6(2) of the Constitution states that all people of Bangladesh will be known as ethnic Bengali (Chowdhury, 2014). This precludes the indigenous peoples from having any form of recognition regarding their ethnic origins and disregards the multi-ethnic make-up of the country.

Chittagong Hill Tracts

Known for its hills and forests, the CHT region constitutes 10% of the total geographical area of Bangladesh and is home to 13 different indigenous communities. Tribes of the Mongoloid race, who are of Arakanese origin, were the original inhabitants while other indigenous communities arrived between the 16th and 19th century from the south. The CHT consists of three districts called Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachari, which have suffered from decades of violence (Dhamai and Drong, 2014). The forest conservation policies of the central Government and the immigration of Bengali settlers to the area forced the indigenous peoples to retreat further into the hills in the 1950s and gave rise to feelings of resentment and exclusion. In 1957, the indigenous students groups began to form political parties to resist the policies of the Government and by 1972 these groups had merged into the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS)¹ (Bertocci, 1984). The decades-long armed conflict ended with a Peace Accord between the PCJSS and the Government of Bangladesh in 1997, which recognised the CHT area as a tribal inhabited region with its own governance system. The Peace Accord includes building blocks for future self-determination and the promise of the withdrawal of all temporary military camps. However, large parts of the Peace Accord are yet to be implemented and the CHT remains a militarised area under governmental control (Dhamai and Drong, 2014).

During the decades-long armed conflict, the central Government executed a 'rehabilitation programme' focused on population transfer, which settled large numbers of Bengalis to the CHT to ensure that indigenous peoples would be outnumbered in their own region. These waves of transmigration commenced in 1979 and were organized by the civil and military administration in order to counter the influence of the PCJSS rebels. The Bengali settlers forcefully occupied the lands that belonged to the indigenous communities and evicted them (Chowdhury, 2014; Dhamai, 2006). A census in 2011 indicated that the number of Bengali settlers constituted 47% of the population in the CHT, whereas Bengali inhabitants only reached 22% before the programme of rehabilitation commenced (Hossain, 2013, p:22-30). The Jumma people are among the most persecuted of all minorities and face continuous human rights violations concerning land grabbing, limited access to education and severe ethnic, religious and socio-economic discrimination (Dhamai, 2006).

¹ PCJSS is a political party formed in 1972 to represent indigenous peoples of CHT in Bangladesh.

GENDER AND SEXUAL MINORITIES

Bangladeshi's gender and sexual minorities (lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender – LGBT) often feel insecure about their gender identity and sexual orientation for a number of reasons, including the criminalisation of same-sex relations, persisting stigmatisation, and a societal denial about the existence and validity of such diversity. The socio-cultural and religious taboos in Bangladesh make LGBT groups vulnerable to discrimination and violence. There is also a lack of confidence among the LGBT community members stemming from societal pressure, as they are forced to live with a non-existent sexual orientation and gender identity. Most LGBT people in Bangladesh are invisible. The Hijra community, consisting of eunuchs, intersex and transgender people, are much more visible than the rest of the LGBT group. The Hijras have enjoyed a rich tradition in South Asian culture for thousands of years. Due to cultural and religious beliefs, Hijras are recognised as semi-sacred individuals who can bestow fertility, prosperity and health on a newborn and its family. Unfortunately, this status has an insidious aspect: it dehumanises Hijras by removing all other aspects of their identity, leading to Hijras being subjected to violence, discrimination and inequality. Hijras are treated as outcasts and are often targets of human rights violations. Many do not have access to a proper source of income and cannot hold mainstream jobs due to social stigma and the lack of access to education.

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“ Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels. ”

– Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Art. 1

Civil Society in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is home to one of the largest civil society sectors in the world. After the Liberation War in 1971 and a famine in 1974, in which an estimated six million people lost their lives, a strong culture of charity and civic initiatives flourished in the country. Civil society took the lead in response to the humanitarian catastrophe and large-scale atrocities by initiating relief and rehabilitation efforts in the spirit of social change and welfare protection (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2007). Even today, the spirit of these initiatives is still continuing through the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in various fields, including developmental work, education, human rights awareness, and advocacy efforts for social change. A research by the Asian Development Bank’s NGO and Civil Society Center in 2008 showed that 26,000 NGOs were registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau in Bangladesh. These NGOs have contributed immensely to the welfare of Bangladeshi society by creating job opportunities and attracting indispensable resources for the country. Moreover, the NGO sector has taken on a broader role by stepping into the legal vacuum that vulnerable groups face when it comes to enforcing their rights (ADB, 2008). NGOs remain a key player among the aid community in Bangladesh, but are heavily dependent on foreign donations and sources from international organisations.

At present, they operate under numerous restrictions and challenging circumstances. NGOs not only lack adequate infrastructure and financial sustainability, they are also affected by the political instability in Bangladesh (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2007). Another severe constraint is the prevailing culture of impunity in which human rights abuses against human rights defenders are left unpunished.

“All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law.”

– Bangladesh Constitution, Art. 27

Situation of Minorities in Bangladesh before the law

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Acts of vandalism and desecration

2014 witnessed numerous incidents of vandalism and desecration directed at places of worship of religious minorities. These acts included thefts of property in places of worship, damaging of religious statues and arson attacks. Such attacks are based on religious animosity, a symbolic violence that constitutes a message to religious minorities that their religious beliefs are not welcome in the community or country. However, at times it is difficult to identify the motivation behind attacks when property disputes, personal conflicts or even political affiliation are involved. Attacks against places of worship, used as a method of voter intimidation or retaliation against voters, intensified during the national election period. In addition, attacks against Hindu and Buddhist temples were also documented as part of communal attacks. Hindu temples were also targeted prior to their religious festivals. For instance, before Durga Purja, an annual publicly celebrated Hindu festival, Hindu statues in various temples were vandalised.

Hindu, Buddhist and Christian communities continued to face human rights violations against the freedom to maintain places of worship in 2014.

On **February 19**, 2014, a church in Boomka village in Lalmonirhat district was attacked. The doors and windows of the church were vandalised and seven Bibles were stolen, said local correspondents.

On **February 25**, 2014, a Hindu temple in Bathania Chala, Gazipur district was attacked at night. All statues in the temple were vandalised, removed and dumped in a field near the temple. The attackers also left a note threatening the Hindus with bomb attacks if they did not stop worshipping statues.

On **February 26**, 2014, a Buddhist temple in Bhuachari village in Khagrachari district was attacked by a group of men. The perpetrators vandalised Buddha statues and other property within the temple. Eight people were injured in a clash between those who attacked the temple and local villagers who rushed to the scene.

Attacks against places of worship occurred during the national election period. The national elections were held on January 5, 2014.

On **January 2**, 2014, a Hindu temple in Shalmara village in Lalmonirhat district was set on fire.

On **January 8**, 2014, a Hindu temple was set on fire in Kalmakanda, Netrakona district and three Hindu statues were vandalised.

Attacks against places of worship before Hindu festival, Durga Purja.

On **September 24**, 2014, five temples in Batrish area within Kishoreganj district were attacked prior to the biggest Hindu festival, Durga Puja. Eleven statues of gods and goddesses, including the Hindu goddess Durga, were vandalised.

On **September 27**, 2014, three Hindu statues in a temple in Kawnia neighbourhood of Barisal city were vandalised, just three days prior to Durga Puja celebrations.

On **September 28**, 2014, a Durga statue was vandalised at the Naranyanpur pandal in Pirganj, Thakurgaon district.

These attacks against places of worship create a collective insecurity among religious minorities and isolate the communities from the rest of the society. In numerous incidents law enforcement authorities failed to take adequate steps to bring the perpetrators to justice. The impunity enjoyed by perpetrators and victims' lack of access to justice are primary factors contributing to violence against religious minorities.

Abductions and forced conversions

In Bangladesh, young girls from religious minority communities are at risk of forced religious conversions, which involve abduction, coercion, threats, and in severe cases, rape or sexual abuse, physical violence and forced marriage. In 2014, this complex form of human rights violations, which is based on a victim's religion or beliefs and gender, remained an issue for young girls from religious minorities. In most reported cases, the victims are girls between the ages of 10 and 18 who are threatened and abducted through force by groups of men. In the majority of cases, the victims are subjected to sexual violence, and also forcefully converted to the mainstream religion, Islam. The conversions are carried out to isolate the victims and prevent them from seeking or obtaining help from their families and communities. In certain cases, the victims are coerced to sign documents declaring that they are adults and are willing to convert to Islam, in order to later on marry one of the perpetrators. Forced religious conversion and marriages are means of controlling the victims, to eliminate their autonomy and discourage the family from recovering the victims. In general, the perpetrators are from the locality of the victims and her family. Therefore, in most cases the family and police are able to identify the perpetrators and learn the whereabouts of the victims.

In some reported incidents, the police initially refused to accept the complaint and lodge a First Information Report (FIR)² by labelling the incident as a personal affair and not a crime. However, even where FIRs have been lodged, there are incidents where the police still refused to start an investigation claiming a lack of grounds to investigate or that the case is not serious in nature. The failure of law enforcement agencies to acknowledge and address these types of crimes leads to delays in the criminal procedure and jeopardises the recovery of the victims and their access to justice.

On **March 2**, 2014, Devi (pseudonym, age 18, belongs to the Hindu minority) was abducted on her way to school in Narayangaj district and forced into a micro-bus by a group of men from the area. The victim was forcefully converted to Islam. The victim's family registered the case with the police but have been threatened by the perpetrators not to pursue the case and try to recover their daughter.

On **April 29**, 2014, Maya (pseudonym, age 11, belongs to the Hindu minority) was abducted in Lalmonirhat District, followed by a forced conversion to Islam and a marriage to one of her abductors. The family of the victim immediately went to the police for help. The FIR was only lodged two days after the incident.

On **September 19**, 2014, Priya (pseudonym, age 17, belongs to the Hindu minority) was abducted on her way to school in Dhaka district. Despite the family claiming to know who the perpetrators were, the police were unable to trace the victim's whereabouts.

Abductions, forced conversion and marriages are also a form of gender-based violence that falls into the intersection of gender equality and freedom of religion or belief. The victims suffer from physical and mental trauma at being unable to secure any form of redress and the approach of law enforcement agencies compounds the problem.

² FIR is an official document prepared by the police upon receiving a complaint lodged by the victim or someone on the victims behalf.

LAND GRABBING AND FORCED EVICTIONS

According to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, a forced eviction was defined as “a permanent or temporary removal from housing, land or both. The removal is carried out against the will of the occupants, with or without the use of force. It can be carried out without the provision of proper alternative housing and relocation, adequate compensation and/or access to productive land, when appropriate. It is carried out without the possibility of challenging either the decision or the process of eviction, without due process and disregarding the State’s national and international obligations” (OHCHR, 2014).

In 2014, forced acquisition of land, commonly known as land grabbing, and forced evictions remained a significant issue faced by indigenous peoples and religious minorities. The human rights aspect of land grabbing and forced evictions focuses on loss of access to land and resources. However, the far-reaching human rights implications of land dispossession, such as right to water, food, adequate housing, work and education, push for the identification of land rights as recognisable human rights. The intensity of land dispossession in Bangladesh has significant traumatic effects on indigenous peoples and religious minorities; both communities, especially the indigenous peoples, depend on land for their livelihood and maintaining a relationship with their ancestral lands is integral to their culture.

Land grabbing that occurs in the indigenous community has a definite *modus operandi*, particularly regarding the indigenous peoples living in CHT, including the following:

- The Government acquires private and common lands (ancestral lands) of the indigenous community and claim them as state owned lands. The establishment of Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB)³ or military camps is given as one of the reasons for the state acquiring land. Under the amended CHT District Council Act 1998, BGB cannot acquire any land, apart from the Reserved Forest⁴ land, without the permission of one of the Hill District Councils (HDC)⁵. However, there are numerous instances to date of BGB having acquired land without obtaining HDC approval and acquiring land that is not Reserved Forest;
- Forced occupation of private and common lands of indigenous peoples by Bengali settlers in CHT;
- Acquisition of private and common lands by government or private infrastructure projects.

3 BGB is a paramilitary force that secures the borders of Bangladesh.

4 Land that is not considered traditional land by the indigenous community in CHT.

5 HDCs are the local administration bodies that are vested with the power of giving prior approval in the case of any sort of lease, purchase, sale, transfer and acquisition of the land in the CHT region.

On **February 9**, 2014, a local leader, allegedly from the Awami League, occupied a piece of land belonging to a Hindu family. The father and son were taken to the local leader's house and were coerced into signing a declaration which stated that they were handing over approximately 0.31 acres of land to the local leader.

On **May 4**, 2014, the local Buddhist community of the Ramjadi temple area in Bandarban staged protests against alleged land grabbing of a Buddhist temple in Bandarban district, CHT by BGB. The land, which had been acquired for establishing BGB sector headquarters in Bandarban, was originally owned by local indigenous peoples and the Ramjadi Buddhist Temple.

On **May 15**, 2014, approximately 29 acres of land (including households and cultivation lands of indigenous people) was handed over to the 51 BGB battalions by the District Administration in CHT. The land was being fenced and the indigenous community tried to stop the process. There was a clash between indigenous people, BGB and the police. The indigenous people were forcefully evicted from the acquired land.

— VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS

Violence against indigenous women and girls remained pervasive in 2014; 58 cases of violence against indigenous women and girls were reported during the course of 2014. Within a two-month period (September to November) at least 13 indigenous women and girls were subjected to violence, including sexual violence (including rape and attempted rape), abduction and physical assaults. These attacks constitute a violation of basic human rights, instilling insecurity and fear in the lives of the survivors. Survivors are discouraged in seeking justice by seeing the existing inaction of law enforcement authorities and the consequent impunity that perpetrators enjoy.

Indigenous women and girls already face discrimination and exclusion in social, political and economic life in Bangladesh purely because they are women and belong to an ethnic minority group. The root causes of violence against indigenous women and girls include a culture of communal oppression, a long-standing culture of impunity, the absence of constitutional protection, a weak legal system and land grabbing. These factors have a compounding effect on an already disenfranchised section of Bangladeshi society and enables the violence perpetrated against them to continue.

Gender-based violence against indigenous women and girls has long-term effects on the survivors and the community, including sexual, physical and physiological consequences, while also hindering the socio-economic development of the country. Indigenous women and girls who are subjected to gender-based violence due to land grabbing are also deprived of a livelihood, which makes them more vulnerable to violence and sexual harassment.

March 23, 2014, a 13 year old Marma girl was raped in Rangamati district. The victim identified the perpetrator and a case was registered, but no one was arrested.

April 24, 2014, an 18 year old Tripura girl was raped by a religious leader in Khagrachari district. The military offered the victim's guardians financial compensation instead of filing a case.

September 3, 2014, a 13-year old Tripura girl in Khagrachari district was raped and she identified the perpetrator. When the incident became known, local Bengali elders became involved in mediation between the perpetrator and the victim's guardians. The perpetrator was required to provide financial compensation for the crime and no case was filed against the perpetrator.

COMMUNAL ATTACKS

Communal attacks against minorities have been on the rise over the past two years in Bangladesh. 2014 was marked as a year of violence against religious minorities and indigenous peoples. Waves of communal attacks appeared to follow the same premeditated pattern. Communal attacks, whether spontaneous or planned, involve a series of acts and human rights violations against persons due to their membership of a group. These acts include physical violence against persons, attacks against property and places of worship and sexual violence against women. The communal attacks have various motivations, ranging from land grabbing and land disputes, fabricated blasphemy accusations to hostility towards ethnic and religious minorities and political interests. Government officials, including law enforcement agencies, who are responsible for preventing such attacks and creating a safe environment for minorities have constantly failed to address these issues and provide appropriate preventive measures.

In 2014, the scale of the attacks against Hindu, Buddhist and indigenous villages was alarming and communal attacks continued to occur throughout the year at a regular rate, at least every month. In most cases the *modus operandi* was distinguishable: the perpetrators, generally large crowds of armed young men, attacked houses and businesses, burned down worshipping areas, vandalised property and attacked community members, including sexually assaulting women. The security forces, law enforcement agencies, and Government failed to protect these minorities or provide adequate compensation for their losses. There were even allegations that security forces were involved in some of the attacks.

The communal attacks on minorities escalated before, during and after the country's 10th national elections took place on January 5, 2014. Most Hindus conventionally lean towards the ideology of AL because it is the closest to their interest and tend to vote for the party. The ideological clashes between secular Bengalis and Islamists turned into a political stand-off between the main parties and led to violent clashes among party supporters and violent backlashes towards minority voters. Hindu communities in various districts (Noakhali, Gaibandha, Chittagong, Rangpur, Sylhet, Chapai Nawabganj, Netrakona, Jessore and Lalmonirhat) were attacked by mobs who were allegedly affiliated with opposition parties, BNP and Jamaat. Attackers vandalised hundreds of homes and businesses owned by minority communities, particularly Hindus. During and after the elections, the Hindu community was attacked either to prevent them from

voting or as an act of retaliation for casting their votes (Harrison, 2013). In many cases, the victims were not able to identify the attackers, however, some of victims alleged that the attackers were supporters of BNP and Jamaat.

Communal Attacks during and after elections

On **January 5, 2014**, a Hindu village in Jessore district was attacked a couple of hours after voting in the national elections ended, allegedly by BNP and Jamaat supporters to retaliate against the community for casting their votes. 130 houses were vandalised and 10 houses were burned down. Approximately 600 Hindus from the village took shelter in the neighbouring village, Diyapara. Two Hindu men were also beaten up by the attackers.

On **January 5, 2014**, a Hindu village in Dinajpur district came under attack allegedly led by BNP and Jamaat supporters, due to the fact that villagers casted their votes and ignored the parties' boycott of the 10th national elections.

On **January 6, 2015**, several homes and businesses of Hindus were attacked in Gaibdha District. The feeling of insecurity spread among various Hindu villages in the area.

Communal attacks against indigenous peoples and religious minorities

On **April 27, 2014**, a mob attacked several homes and a temple at Baghsitarampur, a Hindu majority village, in Comilla District. The attack occurred after allegations of two young people from the Hindu community posting blasphemous comments on Facebook. Nearly 35 houses were looted. The police arrived after the perpetrators had fled the scene. The attacks seemed to be pre-planned: the perpetrators distributed leaflets and made announcements over loudspeakers in order to mobilize the attackers. One day after the attack 17 people were arrested.

On **December 16, 2014**, three Jumma villages of Rangamati District in CHT were attacked by 400-500 Bengali settlers. Fifty houses, seven shops and a Buddhist temple were vandalised and burned, and three people were assaulted by the Bengali settlers. The perpetrators committed the attack in response to alleged damage caused by the Jumma people on a pineapple plantation belonging to the Bengali settlers on 15 December 2014. The district officials provided relief supplies to the indigenous victims, however, it was not an adequate compensation for their losses. There were also allegations of army officials being present during the incident and actively participating in the attacks.

The attacks before and after the elections occurred mainly in minority villages close to the Indian border. Certain villagers decided to flee to India in the hope of finding shelter. The abandoned properties and land of minorities then become easy targets for land grabbing. The communal attacks are fuelled by the atmosphere of impunity in Bangladesh. The police and judicial authorities fail to adequately respond to communal attacks, which encourages future violent incidents and perpetuates fear and insecurity among minority communities.

The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law. United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups, and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Human Rights Defenders) Article 12(2) The State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration.

– Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Art. 12(2)

Attacks Against Human Rights Defenders

Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in Bangladesh continued to be victims of physical attacks, arbitrary arrests, forced abductions and sexual assaults in 2014. Individuals and organisations speaking out against human rights violations, the unstable political climate and the deteriorating situation of minorities were increasingly at risk of harassment, intimidation and attacks by state and non-state actors. Currently, there is no specific legal framework in place to facilitate or protect the activities of human rights defenders in Bangladesh. However, the Constitution does guarantee certain fundamental rights, such as the right to the protection of law (article 31), the right to life and liberty (article 32), safeguards as to arrest and detention (article 33), protections in trial and penalty (article 35), freedom of movement (article 36), freedom of assembly (article 37), freedom of association, (article 38), freedom of speech (article 39) and freedom of religion (article 41). Despite these constitutional guarantees, HRDs are not afforded adequate protection and assailants are not prosecuted for their wrongdoings against HRDs. Thus, a reform of the legal system and its laws are required in order to ensure protection and that all violations concerning HRDs will be effectively addressed in the future.

On April 16, 2014, Abu Bakar Siddique, a businessman and the husband of prominent human rights defender Sayeda Rizwana Hasan, was abducted by unidentified men while travelling to Dhaka from Narayanganj by car. It was suspected that the motivation behind the abduction was discontent relating to Ms Hasan's environmental advocacy work as the Executive Director of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association. Her human rights work focuses on, among other, actions against land grabbing, illegal encroachment and industrial pollution and has given rise to threats before. After 33 hours, Mr. Siddique was released by his abductors and left blindfolded near Ansar camp in the locality of Mirpur. He arrived home safely (Forum Asia, 2014).

On **May 15**, 2014, Nur Khan, the prominent human rights defender and Director of the legal aid and human rights organization the Ain Salish Kendra (ASK), escaped from an attempted abduction. On the day of the attempted abduction, Mr Khan and a colleague were travelling from their office in a rickshaw on their way home when a white microbus blocked their passage and five to seven men stepped out. As Mr Khan had noticed a motorbike following his movements in the previous months, he immediately got suspicious and ran back to the ASK office. Mr Khan reported the incident to the police and stated that these people were the same group that had been following him for the past month. No investigation has taken place so far (Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, 2014).

On **July 5**, 2014, members of a Commission of Inquiry into the occurrences in the CHT were attacked in their vehicle. The Commission was on a mission in the CHT to monitor the implementation of the CHT Peace Accord and consisted of lawyer Sultana Kamal, Ms Khushi Kabir, Dr Iftekharuzzaman, Dr Shapan Adnan, Barrister Sara Hossain, Ms Hana Shams Ahmed and Ms Illira Dewan. Just after the Commission left the Rangamati Prajatan Motel, around 50 people aligned to six Bengali settlers' organisations started throwing rocks and bricks at the vehicle, injuring Ilira Dewan, Dr Iftekharuzzaman and Imtiaz Sohel, officer-in-charge of the Rangamati Kotowali Police Station. The police and local administration failed to protect the Commission during their mission and no effective measures have been taken to date to prosecute the attackers (ASK, 2014).

On **August 25**, 2014, the vocal advocate for women's rights Hana Shams Ahmed was attacked during her visit to Bandarban district. The public vehicle she was travelling in with a friend was suddenly stopped. Up to 10 people, who were allegedly associated with the Bengali ultra-nationalist group Bangalee Somo Odhikar Andolon, suddenly appeared and hit the two on their heads and backs after pulling them out of the vehicle. The two police officers that were ordered to protect her were no longer present during the attack (Front Line Defenders, 2014).

The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law. United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups, and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders): Article 11. Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels. United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups, and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders): Article 12(2). The State shall protect by the competent authorities with others, against any violence or other adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action, the present Declaration. Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 1. All are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of law. United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups, and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders): Article 12(2). The State shall protect by the competent authorities with others, against any violence or other adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action, the present Declaration.

“All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.”
– Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 7

Criminalisation of Same-Sex Relations

PENAL CODE

The current Penal Code of Bangladesh has its origins in the codification of criminal law in British India. The foundations of criminal law in British India were laid by the Indian Penal Code (Act XLV of 1860) and Criminal Procedure Code (Act XXV of 1898). After the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the Pakistan Government adopted the Indian Penal Code and only changed the title to Pakistan Penal Code. After the declaration of independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971, the Pakistan Penal Code was adopted by Bangladesh and became part of Bangladeshi law.

SECTION 377

The Penal Code penalises consensual same-sex relations between adults under gender neutral legal provision. Section 377 states: “Unnatural Offences: whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.” Further explanation is provided as follows: “penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section” (Bangladesh Penal Code, 1860, section 377).

Due to the vague definition, section 377 was subjected to various judicial interpretations. The ambiguity of section 377 indicates that it can cover various sexual acts, thus it can also be applicable to heterosexuals. However, section 377 has been solely used as a tool to harass, threaten and extort the LGBT community. It has also impeded LGBT people to access justice and seek protection from aggression due to the possibility of prosecution under section 377. While section 377 is notorious within human rights circles, many people,

including a number of government officials, are not aware of the section and the excessive and invidious impact of it on LGBT communities.

To date, no one has been charged under section 377, however, it continues to infringe on LGBT individual's right to dignity and autonomy. The Government of Bangladesh continues to reject calls from civil society members and other UN member states to abolish section 377. This recurrent negative response particularly resurfaced during the review of human rights records of Bangladesh at the Universal Periodic Review.

The stigma and discrimination faced by the LGBT community results in isolation and a lack of support from family and social structures as well as institutionalised discrimination in the work place and public spaces (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2010).

CODE OF CRIMINAL PROCEDURE

Section 377 of the Penal Code criminalises consensual same-sex acts between adults, however, it has not been enforced through the history of Bangladesh. It is used in conjunction with sections 54 and 55 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), which allow law enforcement agencies to arrest without a warrant and harass the LGBT community (Human Rights Forum Bangladesh, 2013; University of Toronto, 2011). Section 54 and 55 of CrPC are enforced as a so-called “preventative measure”: any police officer in charge can arrest individuals whom he/she has a probable cause or reasonable suspicion that the individual will commit a “cognisable offence” (Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898).

The High Court Division under the Supreme Court of Bangladesh issued detailed guidelines on the enforcement of section 54 of CrPC. These guidelines were issued to limit the abuse of section 54 and provide regulation on arrest without cause, imprisonment and handling of suspects by law enforcement agencies (Khan and Al-Osman, 2010). While the usage of section 54 for arbitrary arrests might have decreased, since the guidelines, similar legal provisions still exist under various Metropolitan Police Ordinances (National Consultation on Punitive Laws hindering the AIDS Response in Bangladesh, 2013). For example, section 86 of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ordinance which states the “penalty for being found under suspicious circumstances between sunset and sunrise” (Dhaka Metropolitan Police, 1974) is also used, to harass and intimidate LGBT people using public spaces (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2010). LGBT individuals who have access to public cruising areas are physically assaulted and forcefully removed from public spaces by the law enforcement agencies (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2010).

Another piece of legislation used to make arbitrary arrests is the Vagrants & Shelterless Persons (Rehabilitation) Act 2011. The law enforcement agencies were given the authority to arrest “vagrants” and hold them for up to two years in rehabilitation centres where the detainees need to join a rehabilitation program. However, this power is known to be used to carry out arbitrary arrests against sex workers.

The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law. United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups, and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Human Rights (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders): Article 1. Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels.

“The right to freedom of association not only includes the ability of individuals or legal entities to form and join an association but also to seek, receive and use resources – human, material and financial – from domestic, foreign, and international sources.”

– UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Maina Kiai, A/HRC/23/39, Par. 8

...protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, harassment, detention or seizure and adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration.

NGO Bill

THE FOREIGN DONATIONS (VOLUNTARY ACTIVITIES) REGULATION BILL 2014

On December 1, 2014, the Cabinet of Bangladesh approved the final draft of the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Bill 2014, aimed at tightening the restrictions on NGOs receiving foreign funds. The initial proposal of the draft bill, approved by the Cabinet of Ministers in June 2014, drew criticism from civil society members. The Bill is currently awaiting Parliament’s approval. The proposed law makes registration with the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) mandatory for all NGOs carrying out activities with foreign funds. This Bill, once enacted, will further facilitate governmental influence over NGOs and curtail the ability of NGOs to engage in their mandated work without political interference.

The proposed law grants the NGOAB extensive powers over the registration, funding and activities of NGOs, including by:

- **Far-reaching meaning given to “foreign donations” (clause 2(5))**
 The Bill uses a broad definition for “Foreign Donations”, which can consist of “cash money, goods or donations and contributions of any kind”. This definition can lead to constraints over non-financial support provided by foreign organisations such as capacity building, educational activities or even consultation.
- **NGO Affairs Bureau approval required before NGO implements any voluntary activity with foreign donations (clause 3 and 4)**
 NGOs will be required to submit an application to the Director General of the NGOAB, detailing the

amount of the foreign donation, the details of the sender and how it will be allocated to implement the voluntary activities. There are no specific time limitations for the Government to provide a response to an application. The absence of time constraints can lead to arbitrary delays for the NGOs.

- **Project approval required (clause 6)**

The Director General of NGOAB must approve any project intended to be carried out with foreign funds. The relevant Ministries will be involved in the project approval process and the project must be revised if the Ministry has any objections to the project. NGOs are also required to take permission from the Ministry of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs prior to carrying out activities in Khagrachhari, Rangamati and Bandarban districts. Similar to the renewal processes for the registration of an NGO, the Bill does not place time constraints on the project approval process either

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association has stated that the right to freedom of association also includes “the ability of individuals or legal entities to form to seek, receive and use resources – human, material and financial – from domestic, foreign, and international sources.” (Maina Kiai, 2013). It also places draconian restrictions on NGOs’ ability to seek, receive and use resources.

The proposed law does not provide an autonomous framework that can monitor the activities of NGOs. It contains an onerous registration and project approval system along with other requirements aimed at restricting the operation of NGOs in Bangladesh. It strengthens existing barriers to receiving foreign funding and, given the extensive approval procedures, will likely deter much needed foreign donor funds. It has the potential to be a tool to silence the voices of opposition and lead to unwarranted political interference.

Key concerns - The Foreign Donation Regulation Bill 2014

1. Far reaching meaning given to “foreign donations”, which includes non-financial support from outside of Bangladesh.
2. NGO Affairs Bureau approval required before NGO implements any voluntary activity with foreign donations.
3. Project approval required for any project intending to use foreign funds.
4. Allows invasive government monitoring of funding and activities.



“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”
— Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 1

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

GHRD urges the Government of Bangladesh to consider the recommendations below and take appropriate actions to improve the current situation of its minorities so that they are able to enjoy their full rights as citizens of Bangladesh.

We further urge international authorities, policy makers and foreign governments to engage in dialogues with Bangladesh to give due consideration to these recommendations and actively persuade and encourage the Bangladeshi Government to implement these and other measures to effect a positive change for the situation of minorities in the country.

GHRD calls on the Government of Bangladesh to:

- Ensure the independence of the judiciary so that court proceedings relating to attacks against minorities and human rights defenders can occur in an impartial way;
- Ensure the police and other law enforcement authorities independently, thoroughly, and transparently conduct investigations into attacks against minorities and human rights defenders.

RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

- Remove the existence of a state religion (Article 2A of the Constitution), so that the fundamental principle of secularism contained in the Constitution can be given effect;
- Provide adequate legislation to prevent forced religious conversions and marriages of young minority girls.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

- Amend the contradictory clauses within the Land Dispute Settlement Commission Act according to the essence and spirit of the Peace Accord and solve the land disputes impartially with full respect to traditional land rights of the indigenous peoples in CHT;
- Implement key international conventions⁶ that would enable the protection and promotion of the rights of indigenous peoples in CHT;
- Ensure the full implementation of the CHT Peace Accord and establish a tangible and clear time frame in this regard;
- Dismantle all temporary military camps in CHT and demilitarise the region as required by CHT Peace Accord;
- Provide adequate legislation for the protection of indigenous women and girls from sexual violence.

GENDER AND SEXUAL MINORITIES

- Abolish section 377 of the Bangladesh Penal Code so that same-sex relations are no longer criminal acts;
- Accept the recommendations of International Conference on Population and Development to protect and fulfil the rights of persons of diverse sexual orientation or gender identity and provide comprehensive sexuality education to young people;
- Amend section 375 of the Penal Code so that the definition of rape is gender neutral.

⁶ International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Populations (Convention No. 107), International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

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