

THE PLIGHTS OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND THE RISE OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISM IN BANGLADESH

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Introduction

For many years, Bangladesh was considered a moderate Muslim state with constitutional guarantees for freedom of religion, a parliamentary democratic system, and a relatively open economy. More recently, however, many observers have begun to question this image of openness and tolerance, and the main turning point was the October 2001 election, which brought into power a coalition between the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami. Almost immediately after the election, the BNP-led coalition (that also included two other parties that are not represented in the government) began to punish those who may have voted for the Awami League, which had been in power from 1996 to 2001.

In December of the same year, Amnesty International released a report on attacks on members of the Bangladesh's religious minorities which stated that Hindus — who now make up less than 10% of Bangladesh's population of 130 million and have tended to vote for the Awami League—in particular have come under attack. Hindu places of worship have been ransacked, villages destroyed and scores of Hindu women are reported to have been raped.¹

The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), a well-respected Bangladeshi NGO, quotes a local report that says that non-Muslim minorities have suffered as a result of the recent changes: "The intimidation of the minorities, which had begun before the election, became worse afterwards."²

While the Jamaat may not be directly behind these attacks, its inclusion in the government has meant that more radical groups feel they now enjoy protection from the authorities and can act with impunity. The most militant group, the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI, or the Movement of Islamic Holy War), is reported to have 15,000 members. Bangladeshi Hindus and moderate Muslims hold them responsible for many of the recent attacks against religious minorities, secular intellectuals and journalists. In a statement released by the US State Department on May 21, 2002, HUJI is described as a terrorist organization with ties to Islamic militants in Pakistan.³

Quite naturally, these incidents attracted the interest of the international media — which, in turn, has led to angry denials from the government in Dhaka. The response is understandable given Bangladesh's heavy dependence on foreign aid, primarily from the West. Bangladesh cannot afford to be seen as a haven for Islamic fanatics and terrorists.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that Bangladesh, over the past decades, has undergone some fundamental political and social changes. A new brand of nationalism with an Islamic flavour is gradually replacing secular Bengali nationalism as the basis for Bangladesh's nationhood. This development is not surprising given that Bangladesh is the only country in the Subcontinent that can claim to be a nation-state with one dominant people, one language and one religion.

But that is bad news for the country's nearly 15 million Hindus, Buddhists and Christians — and attempts to bring the plight of Bangladesh's ethnic and religious minorities to the attention of the outside world have been met with unprecedented intolerance from the authorities. On the night of November 29, 2002, Saleem Samad, the Bangladesh correspondent of Reporters Without Borders and a well-respected local journalist, was arrested and accused of helping two foreign reporters from the British TV station Channel 4.

His detention followed the arrest on November 25 of Channel 4 reporter, Zaiba Malik, and cameraman Bruno Sorrentino, as well as their translator Priscilla Raj and driver Mujib. The Channel 4 team had been in Bangladesh to make a documentary about the situation in Bangladesh, when they were stopped at the Indian border. The European reporters were released on December 11, but Saleem Samad has only recently been freed, and is now going to sue the Bangladesh government for its treatment of him during his detention.

They were not the only reporters to have suffered at the hands of the Bangladeshi authorities. On November 22, 2001, Shariar Kabir was detained by the Special Branch at the immigration desk of Dhaka's international airport. He was on his way back from India, where he had interviewed and filmed Hindus who had fled from Bangladesh. Shariar Kabir was held without charge for two days before the government announced that he had been arrested for "carrying out seditious acts abroad."⁴

While Bangladesh is yet far from becoming another Pakistan or Saudi-Arabia, the forces of religious and political intolerance are no doubt on the rise, and extremist influence is growing, especially in the countryside. It is also there that Bangladesh's own, subtle and sometimes not so subtle brand of ethnic cleansing is taking place.

Demographic Changes Since 1940

What is now Bangladesh — and initially East Bengal and then East Pakistan — has undergone some dramatic demographic changes during the past sixty years. According to the 1941 Census of India, Hindus made up 11.88 million, or 28.3% of the population of then East Bengal. Twenty years later, when East Pakistan was well-established, the number had decreased to 18.5%. More left during the liberation war in 1971, when the Pakistani army targeted Hindus especially. By 1974 only 13.5% of the population of independent Bangladesh was Hindu. According to the latest estimates, the figure is now under 10%.

The first main exodus took place when the former British India was partitioned into India and Pakistan in 1947. Severe communal riots took place in Bengal, which was divided into an eastern part with an overwhelming Muslim majority — which became part of Pakistan although it was separated from the rest of this new country by hundreds of miles of Indian territory — and West Bengal, which had a Hindu majority and became a state within the Indian Union. Millions of Bengali Hindus emigrated or fled to West Bengal and Tripura, and by 1951 the Hindu proportion of the population of East Pakistan had dropped to 22%.

The controversy began already at this time. In the old, undivided Bengal many Hindus had been wealthy landowners, called *zamindars*, and shopkeepers. Through a series of acts and ordinances, they were allowed to take with them a negligible portion of their movable assets. Land and other immovable assets were administered under the East Bengal Evacuees (Administration of Immovable Property) Act of 1951. In effect, the land they left behind was taken over by the state, which, through its Evacuee Property Management Committee, leased it to others.⁵

The next big exodus took place during and after the long and bitter liberation war of 1971, when East Pakistan broke away to become independent Bangladesh. When the rebellion first broke out, and the Pakistan army tried to quell it, the Hindus especially were targeted, as they were seen as a "fifth column" for India, which openly supported the independence movement. In a statement dated November 1, 1971 US Senator Edward Kennedy wrote: "Field reports to the US Government, countless eye-witnesses, journalistic accounts, reports of International agencies such as the World Bank and additional information available to the subcommittee document the reign of terror which grips East Bengal (East Pakistan). Hardest hit have been members of the Hindu community who have been robbed of their lands and shops, systematically slaughtered, and in some cases, painted with yellow patches marked 'H'. All of this has been officially sanctioned, ordered and implemented under martial law from Islamabad."⁶

By the end of 1971, nearly ten million people had fled to West Bengal, where they were sheltered in make-shift refugee camps. 80% of them were Hindus, 15% Muslims, and 5% Christians and Buddhists. When the war was over, and Bangladesh created, very few of the non-Muslims returned to their homes. Therefore, by 1975 only 13.5% of the population was Hindu, and those who remained were no longer landowners and shopkeepers. Most were poor and low caste farmers and fishermen; the new elite that had emerged was almost exclusively Muslim.

A third campaign against the Hindu minority began in 2001, and is still continuing. Thousands of people have fled to India, and many more have been internally displaced following attacks on their communities by Islamic extremists. Many Hindus have moved together because they feel safer if they are surrounded by more members of their own community, but this has created severe pressure on land in a country that already is overpopulated. According to S.K. Datta, former director of India's Central Bureau of Investigation, the number of Hindus in Bangladesh is now down to 9%.⁷

Not only Bengali Hindus have left East Pakistan/Bangladesh since partition in 1947. During the 1960s and 1970s, nearly 200,000 non-Bengali hill peoples have been driven out of the Chittagong

Hill Tracts (CHT). The first exodus occurred when in 1963 a huge hydro-electric project was implemented at Kaptai in CHT, submerging 20,000 ha of the best-quality hill-valley land. At least 100,000 people or more than a quarter of the then total population of CHT, were displaced without adequate rehabilitation.⁸ Many tribespeople ended up in India, where a large number of them was resettled in Arunachal Pradesh.

Tens of thousands of hill people also fled CHT after the emergence of Bangladesh. In a period of strong Bengali nationalism, they were accused of having sided with the enemy, Pakistan. Throughout the 1970s Bengali/non-Bengali relations worsened, and, in 1979, the Bangladesh government decided to launch a scheme to organise and subsidise the settlement of large numbers of plainspeople in CHT. Altogether 400,000 Bengali Muslims from the lowlands are reported to have been resettled in CHT, reducing the original tribal population there to a minority in many areas in the district.⁹

During the past half a century, few countries in Asia have undergone such dramatic demographic changes as East Pakistan/Bangladesh. From being a religiously and ethnically diverse country with a Muslim majority, it has become almost 90% Muslim with little or no room for other communities. The nation-state of Bangladesh has become a reality, and with Islamic fundamentalism on the rise in the country, the plight of the remaining religious and ethnic minorities can only worsen. More attacks on the minorities can be expected, and, given the international community's lack of interest in Bangladesh, this sad situation is likely to remain one of the world's many forgotten and almost unknown tragedies.

Religious Minorities

Most Hindus in erstwhile East Bengal may not have been prosperous, but the Hindu elite, though in a minority, was economically and politically more advanced than the Muslim population of the province. Under British rule, the role of the old Muslim aristocracy declined and a new class of Hindu merchant-*zamindars* replaced the traditional group of landowners from both communities.¹⁰ According to Bangladeshi scholar Muhammad Ghulam Kabir: "The dominance of the Hindus can be illustrated by the fact that out of the 60,000 *zamindars* in the 1870s only 15 per cent were Muslims, who were responsible for nine per cent of the total revenue raised from the *zamindaris*, even though Muslims constituted nearly 65 per cent of the population of East Bengal."¹¹

Nevertheless, the Hindus and the Muslims remained united in the struggle for independence from Britain until World War Two, when in 1942 the Indian National Congress launched its "Quit India Campaign" — with the result that the party was banned and its leaders arrested. The campaign had turned out to be a tactical blunder for the Congress, because the Muslim League alone was able to propagate its policies until the war was over. By the time the Congress leaders were released from jail, the Muslim League had gained a solid support base in all Muslim areas of India — including East Bengal.¹² At the same time, the Muslim League managed to gain support from an unexpected section of society. Lower caste Hindus made up 55% of the total Hindu population of East Bengal, and a significant number of them actually cooperated with the Muslim League. According to M.G. Kabir, they "was cajoled by the Muslim League by the prospect of a bright future where its members would not be subjected to domination and exploitation by the upper caste Hindus."¹³

However, the inclusion of East Bengal in the new Muslim state of Pakistan turned out to be a disaster for both communities, and especially the Hindus. According to journalist and writer Saleem Samad, the Bengali Muslims were discriminated against by the West Pakistanis, and the minorities in East Pakistan were doubly discriminated against.¹⁴ The wealthy Hindus lost their land and much of their other assets when they left for India, while the poor and middle-class Hindus who remained in East Pakistan became targets of discrimination by the central authorities in West Pakistan through a string of new laws.

In 1965, a war broke out between India and Pakistan, and a law called "the Defence of Pakistan Ordinance" was promulgated to "ensure the security, the public safety, interest and the defence of the state."¹⁵ This was followed by an even more draconian regulation termed "the Enemy (Custody and Registration) order II of 1965." India was declared an enemy, and the law allowed "enemy" (in practice Hindu) lands to be expropriated by the state.

After Bangladesh's independence, properties left behind by the Pakistanis and the erstwhile "enemy properties" were combined to a single category. Though the principal aim of the new "Vested and Non-resident Property Act" of 1974 was to take over former Pakistani-owned proper-

ties as well as properties which once belonged to the Hindus who had fled the country during the liberation war, in practice this act was widely used against the entire Hindu community.¹⁶ According to the US State Department: “Approximately 2.5 million acres of land was seized from Hindus and almost all of the 10 million Hindus in the country were affected.”¹⁷

In 2001, the Bangladesh parliament passed a law that required the Government to return all land that had been seized under the “Vested and Non-resident Property Act,” provided the original owners were still in the country. In practice, very little of this materialised, and the outbreak of anti-Hindu pogroms in 2001 could well have been orchestrated by extremist forces in Bangladesh that did not want to see the Hindu minority regain some of its former wealth and political importance, and, as Amnesty International pointed out in its December 2001 report: “None of the governments in Bangladesh since its independence has taken any decisive steps to protect Hindus in the face of potential threats, including the current attacks.”¹⁸

Among the many incidents that Amnesty International reported, the following stand out:

- In the village of Daspara in Minthanala union, Miresarai Upazila, a gang of about 25 youths reportedly attacked homes of Hindus around midnight of November 5, 2001. One person, Sunil Das, 28, was reportedly hacked to death and 16 others were injured, some seriously. They ransacked houses, looted them, dragged family members out of their homes and beat them.
- Two Hindu women were reportedly raped in front of their husbands on October 11, 2001 in Khanzapur Upazila in Gournade, Barisal. The attackers came at night, knocked at the door, and... they then reportedly tied up the husbands and raped the women.
- Two Hindu women were reportedly raped in their home in Bashkandi, Chorfashion, Bhola, on October 6, 2001. Male members of the family had already gone into hiding for fear of being attacked. The attackers entered their home and raped a girl and her mother.¹⁹

In February 2002, the Danish ambassador to Dhaka, Niels Severin Munk, and German envoy Dietrich Andreas, asked the Bangladesh government to take immediate steps to stop all sorts of repression and attacks on the country’s religious and other minorities. The appeal was made while visiting victims of an attack on a Christian community in Pabna.

Religious minorities other than the Hindus have also been targeted. In December 2001, a Bangladeshi newspaper reported that young women from 50 Christian families in Natoore were living in fear of hoodlums who would roar past their huts on motorcycles at night. The hoodlums demanded ransom of 10,000-20,000 Bangladeshi taka (\$175-350) from men in the village — or their daughters. The villagers had also had their crops taken away after the October election.²⁰ In April 2002 a well-known Buddhist monk, Ganojyoti Mohasthobir, was murdered by a group of thugs who demanded he paid them “infidel protection tax.”²¹

Ethnic Minorities

Bangladesh has fewer ethnic minorities than any other country in the Subcontinent, and nearly all of them live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in the southeast. Anthropologists believe that non-Bengali these hillpeoples migrated from areas now in Burma between the sixteenth and mid-nineteenth century. They can be divided into two broad categories: those who live in the hill valleys (the Chakma, the Marma and the Tippera), and those who live in the actual hills (the Bawm, the Mru, the Khumi and several smaller groups). The predominantly Buddhist Chakmas are the largest group with some 400,000 people today.²²

During the British era, the CHT was designated a “Totally Excluded Area,” which meant that people from the plains were barred from settling there. It may seem strange that the area was given to Pakistan, a country which was built on the idea of a uniting all the Muslim areas in India into one state. Islam was non-existent in the CHT, but it was traded off for the predominantly Sikh areas of Ferozpur and Zira in the Punjab, which were given to India.²³

During the first years of Pakistan’s independence, the special status of CHT was retained. But in 1955, the then East Pakistan cabinet decided to bring the district under the administrative system

of the rest of the country. After the military take-over in Pakistan in 1958, the “opening up” of CHT was accelerated, and the construction of the Kaptai dam in 1963 caused the first batch of refugees from the area to flee into India. After 1964, migration from the plains into CHT was no longer illegal, and a steady flow of poor Bengali settlers entered the district. German anthropologist Wolfgang Mey believes this attempt to “Bengalise” the district served the double purpose of somewhat easing the land scarcity in the plains and of strengthening the position of the government in the hills by increasing the proportion of “loyal” (i.e. Bengali Muslim) inhabitants.²⁴

Then came the liberation war, and the king of the Chakma, Raja Tridib Roy, made the mistake of siding with Pakistan, a move that was prompted by fear of being overwhelmed by Bengali nationalists. Many Chakmas suffered as a result, and the government of independent Bangladesh became even more repressive in its treatment of the hill peoples than the Pakistani authorities had been. The mass resettlement of plains people in the hills caused not only tens of thousands of hill people to flee to India, but it also ignited an armed struggle against the central government and the settlers from the plains. For years, the guerrillas, known as Shanti Bahini (“Peace Force”) staged hit-and-run attacks on Bangladeshi army and police posts as well as settler villages. The army responded fiercely, and one of the bloodiest incidents took place on March 25, 1980. Upendra Lal Chakma and two opposition members of parliament reported from the area:

“After visiting the place of occurrence, we found the evidence of the killings and atrocities committed by one unit of the Army at Khaukhali Bazaar of Kalampati Union...The newly arrived settlers also took part in the act of killing and looting of the tribal people. Even after one month of the incident a reign of terror is prevailing in the entire area.”²⁵

Buddhist temples and religious images had been destroyed, they reported. A survivor showed them a mass grave, where fifty to sixty people had been buried. According to one estimate, 300 hillpeople had been killed.²⁶

In 1997 a peace accord was eventually signed between leaders of the resistance and the Bangladesh government, which should have brought 25 years of struggle to an end. But, as the Netherlands-based Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission concluded in 2000: “Today, after almost three years, few of the decisions and measures agreed in the Peace Accord have been implemented, mostly due to delaying tactics by the government...there are also doubts whether the Peace Accord will survive at all should there be a change in government following the national elections scheduled for 2001.”²⁷

There was a change in government in 2001, and the situation in CHT remains as depressing as ever. By the time the Peace Accord was signed, the Bengali had reached 50% of the total population of CHT, up from 3% in 1947.²⁸ No government of Bangladesh would risk antagonising those settlers — and their relatives in the plains — by giving in to demands from the ethnic minorities.

The Rise of Extremist Groups

Recent attacks on Bangladesh’s minorities have been cause for serious concern among the few who follow events in the country. The HUIJ especially has attracted the attention of security planners in the region. The group was formed in 1992 reportedly with funds from Osama bin Laden.²⁹ The existence of firm links between the new Bangladeshi militants and Al-Qaeda was first proven when Fazlul Rahman, leader of the “Jihad Movement in Bangladesh” (to which HUIJ belongs), signed the official declaration of “holy war” against the United States on February 23, 1998. Other signatories included bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri (leader of the Jihad Group in Egypt), Rifa’i Ahmad Taha aka Abu-Yasir (Egyptian Islamic Group), and Sheikh Mir Hamzah (secretary of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan).³⁰

HUIJ is headed by Shawkat Osman aka Maulana or Sheikh Farid in Chittagong and, according to the US State Department, has “at least six camps” in Bangladesh.³¹ According to an eye-witness in Ukhia, a small town south of Cox’s Bazaar, hundred of armed men are staying in one of these camps near the Burmese border. While some of them speak Bengali, the vast majority appears to be Arabs and others of Central and West Asian origin. Villagers in the area have been warned by the militants that they would be killed if they informed the media or raised the issue with the authorities.³²

As with the Jamaat and its militant youth organisation, the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), HUIJ’s main stronghold is in this lawless southeastern part of the country, which includes the border with

Burma. With its fluid population and weak law enforcement, the region has long been a haven for smugglers, gun runners, pirates, and ethnic insurgents from across the Burmese border. The past decade has seen a massive influx of weapons, especially small arms, through the fishing port of Cox's Bazaar, which has made the situation in the southeast even more dangerous and volatile.³³

Typically, the winner in the 2001 election in one of the constituencies in Cox's Bazaar, BNP candidate Shahjahan Chowdhury, was said to be supported by "the man allegedly leading smuggling operations in [the border town of] Teknaf." Instead of the regular army, the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles was deployed in this constituency to help the police in their electoral peace-keeping. This was, according to the NGO SEHD, "criticised by the local people who alleged that the Bangladesh Rifles were well connected with the smuggling activities and thus could take partisan roles."³⁴

In one of the most recent high-profile attacks in the area, Gopal Krishna Muhuri, the 60-year-old principal of Nazirhat College in Chittagong and a leading secular humanist, was gunned down in November 2001 in his home by four hired assassins, who belonged to a gang patronized by the Jamaat.³⁵ India, which is viewing the growth of Bangladesh's Islamic movements with deep concern, has linked HUJI militants to the attack on the American Center in Kolkata (Calcutta) in January 2002, and a series of bomb blasts in the state of Assam in mid-1999.³⁶

In early May 2002, nine Islamic fundamentalist groups, including HUJI, met at a camp near the small town of Ukhia south of Cox's Bazaar and formed the Bangladesh Islamic Manch (Association). The new umbrella organisation also includes one purporting to represent the Rohingyas, a Muslim minority in Burma, and the Muslim Liberation Tigers of Assam, a small group operating in India's northeast. By June, Bangladeshi veterans of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s were reported to be training members of the new alliance in at least two camps in southern Bangladesh.³⁷

These camps were originally set up by groups representing the Rohingyas, a Muslim minority in Burma's western Arakan state, and links between local militants and extremist groups in Central and West Asia are also an indirect outcome of the Rohingya issue. In 1978, 200,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh after Burma's military government had launched a campaign to rid the area of "illegal immigrants." The Rohingyas, who speak the same dialect as the Chittagonians, are not considered an indigenous minority in Burma, although they have been there for centuries.

The refugee crisis was eventually settled after intervention from the United Nations, but it brought to the area the immensely wealthy Saudi-Arabian charity Rabitat al Alam al Islami, which began sending aid to the Rohingya refugees in 1978. Rabitat also built a hospital and a madrassa at Ukhia south of Cox's Bazaar, which soon became a centre for Islamic activists in the area. Prior to these events, there was only one political organisation among the Rohingyas on the Bangladesh-Burma border, the Rohingya Patriotic Front (RPF), which was set up in 1974 by Muhammad Jafar Habib, a native of Buthidaung in Arakan and a graduate of Rangoon University. He made several appeals — most of them unsuccessful — to the international Islamic community for help, and maintained a camp for his small guerrilla army, which operated from the Bangladeshi side of the border.

In the early 1980s, more radical elements among the Rohingyas broke away from the RPF to set up the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO). Led by a medical doctor from Arakan, Muhammad Yunus, it soon became the main and most militant faction among the Rohingyas in Bangladesh and on the border. Given its more rigid religious stand, the RSO soon enjoyed support from like-minded groups in the Muslim world. These included Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh and Pakistan, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami in Afghanistan, Hizbe-ul Mujahideen in Kashmir and Angkatan Belia Islam sa-Malaysia (ABIM), the Islamic Youth Organisation of Malaysia. Afghan instructors were seen in some of the RSO camps along the Bangladesh-Burma border, while nearly 100 RSO rebels were reported to be undergoing training in the Afghan province of Khost with Hizb-e-Islami Mujahideen.³⁸

The RSO's main military camp was located near the hospital that the Rabitat had built at Ukhia. At the time, the RSO acquired a substantial number of Chinese-made RPG-2 rocket launchers, light machine-guns, AK-47 assault rifles, claymore mines and explosives from private arms dealers in the Thai town of Aranyaprathet near Thailand's border with Cambodia, which in the 1980s emerged as a major arms bazaar for guerrilla movements in the region. These weapons were siphoned off from Chinese arms shipments to the resistance battling the Vietnamese army in Cambodia, and sold to any one who wanted, and could afford, to buy them.³⁹

The Bangladeshi media gave extensive coverage to the RSO buildup along the border, but it soon became clear that it was not only Rohingyas who underwent training in its camps. Many, it turned out, were members of ICS and came from the University of Chittagong, where a “campus war” was being fought between Islamic militants and more moderate student groups.⁴⁰ The RSO was, in fact, engaged in little or no fighting inside Burma. Video tapes from these camps later showed up in Afghanistan, where they were obtained by the American cable TV network CNN and shown worldwide in August 2002. But as the tapes were marked “Burma” in Arabic, it was assumed that they were shot inside that country instead of across the border in southeastern Bangladesh.⁴¹

There was also a more moderate faction among the Rohingyas in Bangladesh, the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF), which was set up in 1986, uniting the remnants of the old RPF and a handful of defectors from the RSO. It was led by Nurul Islam, a Rangoon-educated lawyer. But it never had more than a few dozen soldiers, mostly equipped with elderly, UK-made 9mm Sterling L2A3 sub-machine guns, bolt action .303 rifles and a few M-16 assault rifles.⁴² In 1998, it became the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO), maintaining its moderate stance and barely surviving in exile in Chittagong and Cox’s Bazaar.

The expansion of the RSO in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the unprecedented publicity the group attracted in the local and international media, prompted the Burmese government to launch a massive counter-offensive to “clear up” the border area. In December 1991, Burmese troops crossed the border and attacked a Bangladeshi military outpost. The incident developed into a major crisis in Bangladesh-Burma relations, and by April 1992 more than 250,000 Rohingya civilians had been forced out of Arakan.

The Rohingya refugees were housed in a string of makeshift camps south of Cox’s Bazaar, prompting the Bangladeshi government to appeal for help from the international community. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, came in to run the camps and to negotiate with the Burmese government for the return of the Rohingyas. In April 1992, prince Khaled Sultan Abdul Aziz, commander of the Saudi contingent in the 1991 Gulf War, visited Dhaka and recommended a Desert Storm-like action against Burma, “just what [the UN] did to liberate Kuwait.”⁴³

That, of course, did never happen, and the Burmese government, under pressure from the United Nations, eventually agreed to take most of the refugees back. But an estimated 20,000 destitute refugees remain in two camps between Cox’s Bazaar and the border. In addition, an undisclosed number of Rohingyas, perhaps as many as 100,000- 150,000, continue to live outside the UNHCR-supervised camps. There is little doubt that extremist groups have taken advantage of the disenfranchised Rohingyas, including recruiting them as cannon fodder for Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and elsewhere. In an interview with the Karachi-based newspaper, *Ummat* on September 28, 2001, bin Laden said: “There are areas in all parts of the world where strong *jihadi* forces are present, from Bosnia to Sudan, and from Burma to Kashmir.”⁴⁴ He was most probably referring to a small group of Rohingyas on the Bangladesh-Burma border.

Many of the Rohingya recruits were given the most dangerous task in the battlefield, clearing mines and portering. According to Asian intelligence sources, Rohingya recruits were paid 30,000 Bangladeshi taka (\$525) on joining and then 10,000 (\$175) per month. The families of recruits killed in action were offered 100,000 taka (\$1,750).⁴⁵ Recruits were taken mostly via Nepal to Pakistan, where they were trained and sent on to military camps in Afghanistan. It is not known how many people from this part of Bangladesh — Rohingyas and others — fought in Afghanistan, but it is believed to be quite substantial. Others went to Kashmir and even Chechnya to join forces with Islamic militants there.⁴⁶

In an interview with the CNN in December 2001, American “Taliban” fighter, John Walker Lindh, relate that the Al-Qaeda-directed ansar (“helpers” of the Prophet) brigades, to which he had belonged in Afghanistan, were divided along linguistic lines: “Bengali, Pakistani (Urdu) and Arabic,” which suggests that the Bengali-speaking component — Bangladeshi and Rohingya — must have been significant.⁴⁷ In early 2002, Afghanistan’s foreign minister, Dr. Abdullah, told a Western journalist that “we have captured one Malaysian and one or two supporters from Burma.”⁴⁸

In January 2001, Bangladesh clamped down on Rohingya activists and offices in Chittagong and Cox’s Bazaar, most probably in an attempt to improve relations with Burma. Hundreds were rounded up, and the local press was full of reports of their alleged involvement in gun- and drug-running. Rohingya leaders vehemently deny such accusations, and blame local Bangladeshi gangs

with high-level connections for the violence in the area. But the Rohingyas were forced to evacuate their military camps, which had always been located on the Bangladesh side of the border. It is these camps which have been taken over by HUII and other Bangladeshi Islamic groups have taken over these camps, with the main base being the one the RSO used to maintain near the Rabitat-built hospital in Ukhia, and where the CNN tape was shot in the early 1990s.⁴⁹

More foreign militants arrived in these camps in late 2001. On December 21 — only a few weeks after the fall of the Taliban-stronghold of Kandahar — a ship, the m.v. Mecca, anchored in Chittagong port. Onboard were several hundred Taliban and al-Qaida fighters along with arms and ammunition. Under the cover of darkness, they boarded buses and lorries and were driven down to the southeastern border areas.⁵⁰

It was supposed to have been a secret operation, but news about it gradually leaked out through local NGOs. Then came the bombshell. On September 23, 2002, seven “foreign aid workers” were arrested in Dhaka. The Dhaka police initially said that the men, who were from Libya, Algeria, Sudan and Yemen, were arrested on suspicion of trafficking in children. All of them worked for a Saudi-funded voluntary agency, the Al Haramain Islamic Institute, which first came to Bangladesh in 1992 to work among the Rohingya refugees in the southeast. Before long the Institute became active all over Bangladesh, running three orphanages and 60 madrassas in various parts of the country.⁵¹

Dhaka residents familiar with the arrest of the seven men claimed that students at their facilities were also undergoing military training. Western intelligence sources believe that the seven were among the group that slipped into Bangladesh onboard the m.v. Mecca, and that they later linked up with the Al Haramain Islamic Institute in the area before moving their operations to Dhaka.⁵² The authorities were quick to deny any such links, and it is still unclear whether their arrest was a mistake made by overzealous police officers in Dhaka, because the arrival of the m.v. Mecca was no doubt the outcome of an arrangement between Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and its Bangladeshi counterpart, the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI). Following the terrorist attacks in Washington and New York in September 2001, Pakistan’s military ruler, general Pervez Musharraf, took the controversial step of siding with the US and even allow his country to be used as a staging point in the war against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. This was a complete turn-around on Pakistan’s part as the ISI in the mid-1990s had been instrumental in creating the Taliban movement and also had extensive contacts with Al-Qaeda. Musharraf had to clean up the ISI, but could only do so gradually. While this was in process, hundreds, if not thousands, of Taliban and A-Qaeda fighters came fleeing to Pakistan. This was a major embarrassment, and it is now clear that the ISI contacted the DGFI and had at least some of the now unwanted guests sent away to Bangladesh.⁵³

If this was for “safe-keeping” purposes is debatable, but, even so, their arrival in Bangladesh reflects the close ties that exist between the security services of the two countries — and even more so the growing links between Bangladesh’s Islamic militants and various extremist outfits in Central and West Asia. Even if we accept the “safe-keeping” argument, it is nevertheless unlikely that the militants will be content with keeping a low profile in their new homeland. They are, after all, at war with the West and other “infidels” — including Bangladesh’s own religious and ethnic minorities — and there are plenty of opportunities for new actions in the area where they now are.

These bands of armed men may be small and seemingly insignificant in the broader context of Bangladeshi politics, and despite increased Islamisation over the past decade, the country’s secular roots are holding, at least for the time being. But the country’s Islamic militants are becoming more vocal and daring in their attacks on “infidels,” a worrying sign in what still is basically a very tolerant society. And it is not the number of extremists that matters — even a small group can spread fear and terror — but how well-organised and dedicated they are.

Whither Bangladeshi Nationhood??

Bangladesh was formed in opposition to the notion that all Muslim areas of former British India should unite in one state. It was also based on secularism, which, however, was dropped from the country’s constitution by Gen. Zia ur-Rahman in 1977. Gradually, Bengali nationalism has been replaced with “Bangladeshi nationalism,” which historian M.G. Kabir argues was meant “to simultaneously consolidate feelings of nationhood, provide a series of symbols for unifying the country, contribute to the enthusiasm with which nation-building activities are pursued, and, ultimately

maintain the identity and integrity of Bangladesh as a nation-state independent of India.”⁵⁴

In a posthumously published article written by Zia, he lists seven factors which he considers to be the bases of Bangladeshi nationalism: territory, people irrespective of religion, Bengali language, culture, economic life, religion, and the legacy of the 1971 liberation war.⁵⁵ There is an obvious contradiction between “people irrespective of religion” and “religion,” and that has since then been the dilemma for Bangladesh’s non-Muslim population. The declaration of Islam as the state religion in 1988 made it clear that “religion” in a Bangladeshi context means Islam.

Bangladesh’s Islamic identity has strengthened over the years, and the marked increase in the number of attacks on non-Muslim population groups appear to have been prompted by a desire to build a real “nation state,” free from minorities, as well as motivated by political revenge. Disillusionment with the old Awami League, and the failure of the BNP-led coalition to solve the country’s perennial problems of poverty, underdevelopment and corruption will most likely play into the hands of the Jamaat, already the third biggest party in the country.

That Islam is going to play an even more important role in shaping Bangladesh’s future identity is also evident from the increased role of madrassa education in the country. The madrassas fill an important function in an impoverished country such as Bangladesh, where public education is inadequate and most families cannot afford private schools. According to Mumtaz Ahmed, professor of political science at Hampton University in Virginia, as many as 3.34 million pupils are now studying at Bangladesh’s thousands of madrassas, or nearly five times as many as even in Pakistan.⁵⁶

However, after finishing their education, these students are incapable of taking up mainstream professions, and the mosques and the madrassas are their main sources of employment. As Bangladeshi journalist Salahuddin Babar has pointed out: “Passing out from the madrassas, poorly equipped to enter mainstream life and professions, the students are easily lured by motivated quarters who capitalise on religious sentiments to create fanatics, rather than moderate Muslims.”⁵⁷ Hardly surprisingly, HUJI and other extremist organisations draw most of their recruits from the madrassas.

The very fact that millions of young Bangladeshis now graduate from madrassas run by fanatics is also bound to change perceptions of life and society — and attitudes towards “infidels” in general. A new Bangladesh is emerging and, as Indonesia — another country that until recently was considered a moderate Muslim state — has shown, an economic collapse or political crisis can give rise to militants for whom religious fanaticism equals national pride; and a way out of misrule, disorder and corrupt worldly politics. There is every reason to watch developments in Bangladesh carefully, especially as its government remains vehemently in a state of denial — which means that it is not going to do anything to stop the spread of extremism, fanaticism and the attacks on the country’s religious and ethnic minorities.

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APPENDIX 1

Hindu Population of East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh

1941	28.3%
1951	22%
1961	18.5%
1974	13.5%
1981	12.2%
1991	10.5%
2002	9% (estimate)

Sources: *Bangladesh: A Country Study*, Ed. J. Heitzman & R.L. Worden, 2nd edition, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, Publisher US Army, 1989, pp. 250, 255. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, *Micropedia*, Vol. 1, p. 789.

APPENDIX 2

Main Islamist Groups in Bangladesh

Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI)

The JeI is a political party that dates back to the British colonial era, and the (East) Pakistan period (1947-1971). It supported Pakistan against the Bengali nationalists during the liberation war, and most of its leaders fled to (West) Pakistan after Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Its then amir (chief), Gholam Azam, fought against the freedom fighters in 1971, but returned to Bangladesh a few years later. In December 2000, Motiur Rahman Nizami, another former pro-Pakistani militant, took over as amir of the JeI. In the October 2001 election, the JeI emerged as

the third largest party with 17 seats in Parliament and two ministers in the new coalition government. The Jamaat's final aim is an Islamic state in Bangladesh, although this will be implemented step by step.

Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS)

ICS is the youth wing of the JeI. Set up in 1941, it became a member of the International Islamic Federation of Student Organisations in 1979. The ICS is also a member of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth and has close contacts with other radical Muslim youth groups in Pakistan, the Middle East, Malaysia and Indonesia. One of its main strongholds in Bangladesh is at the university in Chittagong, and it dominates privately run madrassas all over the country. It has been involved in a number of bomb blasts and politically and religiously motivated assassinations. Nurul Islam Bulbul is its current president and Muhammed Nazrul Islam is the secretary general.

Islami Oikyo Jote (IOJ)

A smaller Islamist party that joined the four-party alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which won the October 2001 election. The IOJ secured two seats in Parliament, but did not get any cabinet posts.

Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI)

The HuJI is Bangladesh's main militant organisation. Set up in 1992, it now has an estimated strength of 15,000 and is headed by Maulana Shawkat Osman alias Sheikh Farid in Chittagong. Its members are recruited mainly from students of the country's many madrassas, and until year 2001, they called themselves the 'Bangladeshi Taliban'. The group is believed to have extensive contacts with Muslim organisations in the Indian States of West Bengal and Assam. Azizul Huq, Chairman of the IOJ is a member of the HuJI's advisory council.

'The Jihad Movement'

Osama bin Laden's February 23, 1998, fatwah (religious ruling) urging Jihad against the United States was co-signed by two Egyptian clerics, one from Pakistan, and Fazlur Rahman, "leader of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh". This is not believed to be a separate organisation but a common name for several Islamist groups in Bangladesh, of which HuJI is considered the biggest and most important.

Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO)

The ARNO is a political group among Rohingya migrants from Myanmar, who live in the Chittagong-Cox's Bazaar area, and claim to be fighting for an autonomous Muslim region in Burma's Arakan (Rakhine) State. It was set up in 1998 through a merger of the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO). Within months, however, the front fell apart. The leader of what remains of ARNO, Nurul Islam, is considered a moderate. He also led the ARIF before the merger in 1998.

Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO)

Following the break-up of ARNO in 1999-2000, three new factions emerged, all of them re-claiming the old name RSO. Traditionally, the RSO has been very close to Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir in Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar. In the early 1990s, RSO had several military camps near the Burmese border, where cadres from the ICS were also trained in guerrilla warfare.

APPENDIX 3. HARKAT-UL-JIHAD-AL-ISLAMI/BANGLADESH

Harkat-ul-Jihad-Al-Islami/Bangladesh

Central Executive Body

- a) Maulana Najrul Islam, Amir
- b) Mufti Maulana Safiur Rahman, Dy Amir
- c) Mufti Abdul Hye
- d) Mufti Manjurul Hossain
- e) Maulana Niamatullah Farid

- f Maulana Baqi Billah
- g Maulana Sayeed Abu Taher
- h) Maulana Samsuddin Kasimi
- i) Maulana Abu Nasir
- j) Maulana Fazlu Haq, Amini of Bangladesh Islamic Khelafat Andolan
- k) Maulana Aatur Rahman Khan, Ex-MP of Kishoreganj
- l) Abdul Zabbar of the Young Muslim League
- m) Maulana Mohiuddin of the Islamic Morcha

Advisory Council

- a) Maulana Mohiuddin Khan, Chief
- b) Mufti Abdul Hye, Dy Chief, arrested by Bangladesh police on November 8, 1998
- c) Maulana Manjur Ahmed, arrested by Bangladesh police on November 8, 1998
- d) Maulana Fazlul Karim, Peer of Charmonai, chief of the Islamic Shasantantra. Andolan
- e) Peer of Sharsina
- f) Peer of Fultali, Sylhet
- g) Mufti Shafi Ahmed, Hathazari madrassa, Chittagong
- h) Mufti Taherullah, Patiya madrassa, Chittagong
- i) Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad
- j) Maulana Karnaluddin Zafri
- k) Maulana Delawar Hossain Saidi
- l) Maulana Obaidullah
- m) Prof. Akhtar Farooq
- n) Maulana Saikul Haddis Allama
- o) Azizul Huq, Amir, Bangladesh Khilafat, Majlish and Chairman of the Islami Oikya Jote
- p) Mohd. Abdus Mannan, principal Gauhardanga madrassa, Gopalganj, secretary general of the Sarbodaya Olema Parishad

Khulna Branch

- a) Mohd. Sirajul Haque, Amir
- b) Mohd. Anisur Rahaman
- c) Mohd. Sattaruddin Khan
- d) Kasem Ali

Chittagong Branch

Office at Jameyat-ul-Ulurn madrassa, Lalkhanbazaar, Chittagong and Chief Maulavi is Maulana Azharul Islam

- a) Abdur Rouf, Amir
- b) Mufti Shaiqur Rahman, Dy Amir
- c) Abdul Baset
- d) Abdul Khaled
- e) Abu Tarek
- f) Abdul Hakim
- g) Amzad Belal
- h) Obaidur Rahman Khan
- i) Maulana Abdul Quddus
- j) Maulana Mahbulul Alam, patron, based at 73, Kusumbagh, Dhoberpahar, near Chittagong

Cox's Bazaar Branch

Maulana Salahul Islam, 36 yrs old, works for an NGO called AlHaramain (a Mecca-based organisation) in Cox's Bazaar. Graduated from of Riyadh University, reportedly close to the chief of the Karachi branch of the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen.

Sylhet Branch

- a) Maulana Mohd. Abdul Karim, Patron, aka Sheikh-e-Kauria and president of the Sylhet branch of the Jamaat-e-Ulema-elIslam, Sylhet
- b) Peer of Fultali, Fultali, Sylhet
- c) Juned Ahmed, Biyani Bazaar, Sylhet
- d) Abdul Matin, Biyani Bazaar, Sylhet

Jessore Branch

- a) Maulana Manirul Islam Madani, patron, Viana, Jessore Katwali PS
- b) Mufti Aminul Huq, imam of Railway Station madrassa, Jessore
- c) Maulana Abdul Hassan Muhaddis (BA from Calcutta University and FAREK [similar to an MA in religious studies] from Deoband madrassa, Sahranpur, UP, India. Presently employed as principal, Qaumi madrassa, Jessore. Gen. Scy. of the Jessore branch of the Nizami-e-Islami party in the East Pakistan era.
- d) Maulana Abdur Rouf, 50 yrs old, originally from Bongaon, West Bengal. Ex org. scy. of the Nizami-e-Islami party in the East Pakistan era. Arrested in 1971 for his anti-Liberation movement activities. Now a resident of Barandipara, Jessore.
- e) Mufti Aminul Islam
- f) Abdur Jabbar (retired DSP, Bangladesh Police)
- g) D.K. Baksh (retired subedar major, Bangladesh Army)

Brahmanbaria Branch

- a) Maulana Sirajul Islam, head, Zamia Yunnsia madrassa, Brahmanbaria
- b) Abdul Karim, leader of the Taliban Mujahids, trained in Afghanistan. There are 15 Bangladeshi Taliban Mujahids under his command, recruited from and based at Brahmanbaria

Comilla Branch

- a) Imam of Ibne Tahmina High School, patron, Comilla
- b) Mohd. Ali Akhtar, leader of Taliban Mujahids, Comilla. There are 15 Bangladeshi Taliban Mujahids under his command, recruited from and based at Comilla

Training establishments

1. Mohiursunnals madrassa. Knila, Teknaf, Cox's Bazaar (near the Burmese border)
2. Hathazara madrassa, Chittagong Sadar
3. Patiya madrassa, Patiya, Chittagong Sadar
4. Jalpaitali and Tetultali, Bandarban District, Chittagong Hill Tracts
5. Maheshkhali and Garzania Hills in Nykhongchari PS, Bandarban District, Chittagong Hill Tracts
6. Raniping, Kazir Bazaar and Munshi Bazaar madrassas in Fultali PS, Sylhet District.
7. Baluchhera, Cox's Bazaar District (main camp)
8. Jameyat-ul-Ulum madrassa, Lalkhanbazaar, Chittagong
9. Brahmanbaria
10. Nayapara, Damudia Union, Teknaf, Cox's Bazaar District
11. Narichha Bazaar, Chittagong District
12. Rangamati Islamic Complex madrassa, Rangamati, Chittagong Hill Tracts
13. Mohmadpur Rahmiya Jamiatul madrassa, Dhaka
14. Lalmatia Kaumi madrassa, Dhaka
15. Malibagh Kaumi madrassa, Dhaka
16. Hajaripara Kaumi madrassa, Dhaka
17. Madani Kaumi madrassa, Dhaka
18. Farmgati Kaumi madrassa, Dhaka
19. Gazipur Bormi Kaumi madrassa