

BANGLADESH 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution designates Islam as the state religion but upholds the principle of secularism. It prohibits religious discrimination and provides for equality for all religions. The government provided guidance to imams throughout the country on the content of their sermons in its stated effort to prevent militancy and to monitor mosques for “provocative” messaging. In November police arrested two suspects with ties to an al-Qa’ida inspired group in connection with the 2015 killing of a U.S.-born blogger critical of religious extremism. According to the press, one of the suspects confessed to involvement in the killing of four other secular activists. Despite government orders to the contrary, village community leaders, often working together with local religious leaders, used extrajudicial fatwas to punish women and other groups for perceived “moral transgressions.” Religious minority communities such as Hindus and Christians, which are also sometimes ethnic minorities, reported the government failed to effectively prevent forced evictions and land seizures stemming from land disputes. According to local organizations and media reports, the Ministry of Education (MOE) made significant changes to traditionally secular Bengali language textbooks, such as removing non-Muslim authors’ content and adding Islamic content to nonreligious subject matter. The government continued to provide law enforcement personnel at religious sites, festivals, and events considered to be possible targets for violence.

There were attacks on religious minorities, particularly Buddhists and Hindus, during the year. In June hundreds of Bengali Muslim villagers in the southeastern part of the country set fire to 300 houses belonging to members of the Chakma, a mostly Buddhist minority. A 70-year-old woman died during the attacks. The arson followed the killing of a local Muslim resident. In November a mob, angered by a Facebook post reportedly demeaning Islam, burned and vandalized approximately 30 houses belonging to Hindus in the northern district of Rangpur.

In meetings with government officials and in public statements, the U.S. Ambassador and other embassy representatives continued to speak out against acts of violence in the name of religion and encouraged the government to uphold the rights of minority religious groups and to foster a climate of tolerance. The Ambassador and other embassy staff met with local government officials, civil society members, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and religious leaders to continue to underscore the importance of religious tolerance and to explore the link

between religion and violent extremism. The embassy provided humanitarian assistance to ethnic Rohingya, who are nearly all Muslim, fleeing Burma. The embassy also organized an exchange program on religious education in the U.S. The overarching objective of the program was to explore the role of religion and religious freedom in a multicultural society.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 157.8 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2013 census, Sunni Muslims constitute 89 percent of the population and Hindus 10 percent. The remainder of the population is predominantly Christian (mostly Roman Catholic) and Theravada-Hinayana Buddhist. The country also has small numbers of Shia Muslims, Bahais, animists, Ahmadi Muslims, agnostics, and atheists. Many of these communities estimate their respective numbers to be between a few thousand and 100,000 adherents. Many ethnic minorities practice minority religions and are concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and northern districts. For example, the Garo in Mymensingh are predominantly Christian as are some of the Santal in Gaibandha. Most Buddhists are members of the indigenous (non-Bengali) populations of the CHT. Bengali and ethnic minority Christians live in communities across the country, with relatively high concentrations in Barisal, Gournadi, Baniarchar, Monipuripara, Christianpara, Gazipur, and Khulna.

The largest noncitizen population is Rohingya, nearly all Muslim. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), approximately 33,000 Rohingya refugees from Burma are officially registered in the country and are residing in the two official refugee camps within Cox's Bazar district. The government and UNHCR estimate another 900,000 to 1,000,000 Rohingya from Burma are in Cox's Bazar district, including an estimated 500 Hindu Rohingya. Approximately 700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh following the start of violence in Burma's Rakhine State in August.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, "the state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions." The constitution also stipulates the state should not grant political status in favor of any religion. It also provides for the

right to profess, practice, or propagate all religions “subject to law, public order, and morality” and states religious communities or denominations have the right to establish, maintain, and manage their religious institutions. The constitution stipulates no one attending any educational institution shall be required to receive instruction in, or participate in ceremonies or worship pertaining to, a religion to which he or she does not belong.

Under the penal code, statements or acts made with a “deliberate and malicious” intent to insult religious sentiments are subject to fines or up to two years in prison. Although the code does not further define this prohibited intent, the courts have interpreted it to include insulting the Prophet Muhammad. The criminal code allows the government to confiscate all copies of any newspaper, magazine, or other publication containing language that “creates enmity and hatred among the citizens or denigrates religious beliefs.” The law applies similar restrictions to online publications. While not a stated blasphemy law, authorities use the penal code as well as Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act to charge offenders.

The constitution prohibits freedom of association if an association is formed for the purpose of destroying religious harmony or creating discrimination on religious grounds.

Individual houses of worship are not required to register. Religious groups seeking to form associations with multiple houses of worship, however, must register with either the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) if they receive foreign assistance for development projects or the Ministry of Social Welfare if they do not. The law requires the NGOAB to approve and monitor all foreign-funded projects. The NGOAB director general has the authority to impose sanctions on NGOs for violating the law, including fines of up to three times the amount of the foreign donation or closure of the NGO. NGOs also are subject to penalties for “derogatory” comments about the constitution or constitutional institutions (i.e., the government). Expatriate staff must receive a security clearance from the National Security Intelligence Agency, the Special Branch of the police, and the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence.

The registration requirement and procedures for religious groups are the same as for secular associations. Registration requirements with the Ministry of Social Welfare include submission of certification that the name being registered is not taken; provision of the bylaws/constitution of the organization; a security clearance for leaders of the organization from the national intelligence agency; minutes of

the meeting appointing the executive committee; a list of all executive committee and general members and photographs of principal officers; a work plan; a copy of the deed or lease of the organization's office and a list of property owned; a budget; and a recommendation by a local government representative. Requirements to register with the NGOAB are similar.

Family law concerning marriage, divorce, and adoption has separate provisions for Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. These laws are enforced in the same secular courts. A separate civil family law applies to mixed faith families or those of other faiths or no faith. The family law of the religion of the two parties concerned governs their marriage rituals and proceedings. A Muslim man may have as many as four wives, although he must obtain the written consent of his existing wife or wives before marrying again. A Christian man may marry only one woman. Hindu men may have multiple wives. Officially Hindus have no options for divorce, although informal divorces do occur. Women may not inherit property under Hindu law. Buddhists are subject to Hindu law. Divorced Hindus and Buddhists may not legally remarry. Divorced men and women of other religions and widowed individuals of any religion may remarry. Marriage between members of different religious groups is allowed and occurs under civil law. To be legally recognized, Muslim marriages must be registered with the state by either the couple or the cleric performing the marriage; however, some marriages are not. Registration of a marriage for Hindus and Christians is optional, and other faiths may determine their own guidelines.

Under the Muslim family ordinance, a widow receives one eighth of her husband's estate if she is his only wife, and the remainder is divided among the children; each female child receives half the share of each male child. Wives have fewer divorce rights than husbands. Courts must approve divorces. The law requires a Muslim man to pay a former wife three months of alimony, but these protections generally apply only to registered marriages; unregistered marriages are by definition undocumented and difficult to substantiate. Authorities do not always enforce the alimony requirement even in cases involving registered marriages.

Alternative dispute resolution is available to all citizens, including Muslims, for settling family arguments and other civil matters not related to land ownership. With the consent of both parties, lawyers may be identified to facilitate the arbitration, the results of which may be used in court.

Fatwas may be issued only by Muslim religious scholars, and not by local religious leaders, to settle matters of religious practice. Fatwas may not be invoked to justify meting out punishment, nor may they supersede existing secular law.

Religious studies are compulsory and part of the curriculum for grades three through 10 in all public government-accredited schools. Private schools do not have this requirement. Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian students receive instruction in their own religious beliefs, although the teachers are not always adherents of the students' faith.

The code regulating prisons allows for observance of religious commemorations by prisoners, including access to extra food on feast days or permission to fast for religious reasons. The law does not guarantee prisoners regular access to clergy or regular religious services, but prison authorities may arrange special religious programs for them. Prison authorities are required to provide prisoners facing the death penalty access to a religious figure from a religion of their choice before execution.

The 2001 Vested Property (Return) Act allows the government to confiscate property of anyone whom it declares to be an enemy of the state. Authorities often used it to seize property abandoned by minority religious groups, especially Hindus, when they fled the country, particularly after the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Summary paragraph: Police arrested two suspects with ties to an al-Qa'ida-inspired group in connection with the 2015 killing of a U.S.-born blogger critical of religious extremism. According to the press, one of the suspects confessed to involvement in the killing of four other secular activists. Despite government orders to the contrary, village community leaders, often working together with local religious leaders, used extrajudicial fatwas to punish individuals, mostly women, for perceived "moral transgressions." Religious minority communities such as Hindus and Christians, who also are sometimes ethnic minorities, reported the government failed to effectively prevent forced evictions and land seizures. In these instances, the minorities said law enforcement was sometimes slow to respond. The MOE made significant changes to Bengali language textbooks, which were traditionally secular, such as removing non-Muslim authors' content

and adding Islamic content to nonreligious subject matter. Supreme Court authorities moved a sculpture depicting a blindfolded woman holding a scale from the court's entrance to a less prominent space. Sources said the court took this action in response to statements that the "idol" stood against Islamic values. The government continued to provide law enforcement personnel at religious sites, festivals, and events considered to be possible targets for violence.

The investigation into the 2016 killings of six secular bloggers, online activists, writers, and publishers remained inconclusive, according to press reports. Police had not charged any individuals by year's end.

Outlawed militant group Ansar Al Islam, which according to press reports is likely loosely affiliated with al Qaeda-inspired Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), claimed responsibility for killing nine individuals for "offending Islam" from February 2013 to April 2016. In April the High Court confirmed the death penalty for two individuals found involved in the nine deaths. Police charged suspects in two other killings, leaving six open investigations pending. According to a *Daily Prothom Alo* newspaper report published on September 9, police detained only seven of the 43 suspects in those six pending cases.

On November 6, police announced they had detained Abu Siddiq Sohel, whom they said had admitted to involvement in the 2015 killing of atheist blogger Avijit Roy, a critic of religious extremism. On November 23, police said they had arrested another individual, Arafat Rahman, also wanted in connection with Roy's killing. Machete-wielding assailants hacked to death Roy, a U.S. citizen of Bangladeshi origin, while he accompanied his wife home from a Dhaka book fair. The assailants also seriously injured Roy's widow in the attack. The press reported that police suspected ABT of involvement in Roy's killing, and a police official identified Rahman as a member. The press also reported Rahman had confessed to involvement in the killing of four other secular activists.

In line with its stated intent to facilitate an impartial inquiry into the November 2016 killing of three Santal Christians in law enforcement engagements and arson attacks, the government withdrew the Superintendent of Police of Gabandha District as well as the entire police force from the Govidaganj Sub-District in February to comply with a High Court order. On October 7, personnel from the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) detained Shah Alam, a Union Council member and one of the 33 accused in the case. Several others detained earlier were released on bail. According to media reports, at year's end the PBI had not

filed charges against a parliamentarian from the ruling party and a local civil servant reportedly involved in the incident.

Human rights organizations reported that, despite government orders to the contrary, village community leaders, often together with local religious leaders, used fatwas to punish individuals, mostly women, for perceived “moral transgressions,” such as adultery and other illicit sexual relations. From January to December, the human rights organization Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) documented 10 incidents of punishments under fatwas, including societal shunning, whipping, and forced interim marriages between individuals of different religions. In February the High Court ordered a local government entity to report on action it had taken against the perpetrators of the extrajudicial punishment meted out to a man and a woman in December 2016 in Komolganj Upazila of Maulvibazar District for reported moral transgressions. At year’s end, no new developments were reported.

The government did not approve registrations for a number of religiously affiliated organizations. The government disallowed some religiously affiliated organizations to engage in relief operations for the Rohingya in Cox’s Bazar, such as Muslim Aid.

Hindus, Christians, and members of other religious minority communities, who are also sometimes members of ethnic minority groups, reported several property and land ownership disputes and forced evictions, including by the government, remained unresolved. According to religious minority associations, such disputes occurred in areas near new roads or industrial development zones, where land prices had recently increased. They also stated local police, civil authorities, and political leaders sometimes enabled property appropriation for financial gain or shielded politically influential property appropriators from prosecution. Some human rights groups, including Odhikar, attributed the lack of resolution of some of these disputes to ineffective judicial and land registry systems and the targeted communities’ insufficient political and financial clout rather than government policy disfavoring religious or ethnic minorities.

Religious minorities continued to state minority students sometimes were unable to enroll in religion classes of their faith because of a lack of minority teachers for mandatory religious education classes. In these cases, school officials generally allowed local religious institutions, parents, or others to hold religious studies classes for such students outside of school hours and sometimes exempted students from the religious education requirement.

According to local organizations and media reports, the MOE made changes to Bengali language textbooks, including removing poems and stories penned by non-Muslim writers and replacing pictures of secular items in alphabet references, such as *ol* (a type of yam), with *orna* (hijab). The textbook revisions also introduced religious content in educational disciplines outside of religious studies. Local media reported Hefazat-e-Islam's political advocacy influenced the government's decision to make the changes to the school books. The media report also stated Hefazat-e-Islam was seeking more significant changes to the education system in coming years. Rasheda K. Choudhury, a human rights activist and educator, said "the government is trying to appease Islamists to get their votes"

In an April 11 meeting with approximately 350 Islamic clerics led by Hefazat-e-Islam Chief Allama Ahmad Shafi, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced the government's recognition of degrees granted by thousands of unregistered Qawmi madrassahs. The government issued a notification permitting master's degree equivalent status to the Dawra-e-Hadith, the highest degree offered to graduates by these exclusively religious educational institutes, thus making graduates eligible for government jobs. Some news reports suggested the government recognized the Qawmi madrassah system to win support in advance of the general election due to be held by January 2019.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs had a budget of 6.59 billion taka (\$80.4 million) for the 2017-18 fiscal year, including 3.33 billion taka (\$40.6 million) allocated for development through various autonomous religious bodies. The government provided the Islamic Foundation, administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, 3.27 billion taka (\$39.9 million), which was 98.10 per cent of the total development fund. The Hindu Welfare Trust received 54.8 million taka (\$668,000) or 1.64 percent and The Buddhist Welfare Trust received 2.6 million taka (\$31,700) or 0.26 percent of the total development allocation. The government did not release any of the two billion taka (\$24.4 million) allocation the finance minister announced in his budget speech for the development of Hindu temples throughout the country. While The Christian Welfare Trust did not receive any development funding from the 2017-18 budget, it received 2.1 million taka (\$25,600) to run its office.

On October 29, law enforcement detained six persons for vandalizing and looting a Hindu Durga temple in Shivalaya Upazila (sub-district) of Manikganj District. According to an October 31 *Daily Ittefaq* newspaper report, the temple committee chair accused a local Awami League leader and his nephew of inciting their

constituency to vandalize the temple with the intention of seizing the land where the temple is situated.

On May 26, Supreme Court authorities removed a sculpture at the Supreme Court's entrance depicting a blindfolded woman with scales in one hand and a sword in the other, dubbed "lady justice." The court's decision apparently came in response to demands from some Muslim clerics who stated the "idol" contradicted Islamic values and heritage and would interfere with Eid prayers. Supreme Court authorities removed the statue approximately two weeks after Prime Minister Hasina expressed her support for the clerics' demand to remove the sculpture from the court premises. The move sparked counterprotests demanding the statue be reinstated. On May 28, authorities reinstated the statue in a less prominent space in the Supreme Court compound.

The government continued to provide law enforcement personnel at religious sites, festivals, and events considered potential targets for violence, including the Hindu festival of Durga Puja, Christmas, Easter, and the Buddhist festival of Buddha Purnima.

According to news reports, the government provided extra security to protect Buddhist monasteries in Chittagong and Dhaka in anticipation of possible retaliation for the actions against Rohingya, the vast majority Muslim, by the military and civilians in Burma's Rakhine State. No attacks materialized.

Although most mosques were independent of the state, the government maintained significant influence to appoint and remove imams and continued to provide guidance to imams throughout the country on some aspects of the content of their sermons. Religious community leaders said imams in all mosques usually avoided sermons that contradicted government policy.

The government continued to prohibit transmission of India-based Islamic televangelist Zakir Naik's Peace TV Bangla, which it stated spread extremist ideologies, and closed "peace schools" the government said reflected his teachings. According to civil society organizations, the government overreached in its efforts to ban Peace TV Bangla and could have allowed the locally produced programs featured on the channel to air, even if officials believed censorship of Zakir Naik was necessary.

A media monitoring cell established in 2016 to track media and blogs that write negatively about Hindu, Muslim, and other religious beliefs remained in place.

According to the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC), as of October, authorities had adjudicated approximately 3 percent of 200,000 property restitution cases filed under the Vested Property Return Act and returned a small portion of the land seized mainly from Hindus before the nation's independence. The BHBCUC said deputy commissioners of the various districts and the Ministry of Law were responsible for the slow return of land seized under relevant legislation from Hindus who had left for India. The government did not amend the Vested Property Return Act to accelerate the process of return of land.

President Abdul Hamid continued to host receptions to commemorate each of the principal Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian holidays.

On November 30, Prime Minister Hasina and other officials met Pope Francis, who, during a meeting at the presidential palace referred to the plight of refugees from Rakhine State and called for “decisive measures to address this grave crisis.” He was the first pope to visit the country in 31 years. Religious leaders across various faiths said they were encouraged by the pope's visit and what it meant for religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Communal violence impacting minority religious groups continued to result in deaths, injuries, and damage to property. At times, land disputes disproportionately affected religious minorities, particularly the Hindu community. Members of religious minorities also stated they experienced continued discrimination in employment and housing. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On June 2, ethnic Bengalis in Longdu Sub-District of the Rangamati Hill District set fire to the houses of nearly 300 Chakma ethnic tribal people, most of whom were Buddhist. It was reportedly in retaliation for the killing of Nurul Islam, a local leader of the ruling Awami League's youth front. Ethnic Bengalis stated they blamed local ethnic Chakmas for Islam's death. A 70-year-old Chakma woman was killed in the fires. Both police and affected ethnic Chakmas filed charges against some of the Bengalis for the arson, and police detained 28 suspects who were later released on bail by the court. Ethnic Chakma community leaders said the government did not arrest the mastermind of the arson attack because of his link to the ruling party.

Unlike in 2016, there were no major incidents specifically targeting religious minorities by extremist groups claiming to be affiliated with ISIS or al-Qa'ida in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS).

The Bangladesh Christian Association reported physical injury to a security guard at a church in Pabna on March 10 after aggressors reportedly attacked the guard with sharp weapons. Law enforcement detained three suspects, and the case remained pending at year's end.

The Bangladesh Christian Association also reported, on October 2, assailants abducted Shishir Natale Gregory, a priest at Saint Mary Cathedral in Dhaka, and demanded a ransom for his release. Gregory was able to escape, and local residents in Tongi detained one of his abductors and turned him over to police. It was unclear if the abduction was religiously motivated.

According to human rights organization ASK, attacks during the year targeting Hindus or their property resulted in the death of one person and injuries to 67, compared with seven killed and 67 injured in 2016. Attackers destroyed 166 statues, monasteries, or temples, compared with 197 in 2016, and destroyed 26 homes and three businesses, compared with 192 homes and two businesses in 2016. The motivation for these incidents was often unclear.

The BHBCUC compiled 959 reports of violations of minority rights from newspaper reports from January to October. The incidents included killings, attempted killings, death threats, assaults, and attacks on homes, businesses, and places of worship, rape, and kidnappings. According to the BHBCUC, the primary motivation for most of the incidents was a desire to seize real property, steal, or extort money.

According to media reports, police still had not filed charges in the case involving the July 2016 killing of 22 persons, most of them non-Muslims, at the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka. The attackers singled out non-Muslims and killed the victims with machetes and firearms. At year's end, police had not finalized the investigation, and some attackers remained at large.

On September 21, in Dinajpur Hindu worshippers found statues of deities in a temple destroyed. This was the third incident in the district since August 26.

According to The Bangladesh Buddhist Federation, on September 6, Muslim inhabitants attacked the abbot of East Khadacha Ideal Buddhist Monastery in Matiragana Upazila. The abbot was admitted to a local hospital with critical injuries.

On September 12, Muslims in Jessore assaulted a Buddhist monk, Gyanamitra Bhikkhu, from Chittagong, as he was returning home from India. Taifiq Ahmed Sujan, a leader of the ruling Awami League's student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League, reportedly led the attackers.

On September 23, a Muslim attacked Buddhist monk Agralankar at Cunati Gautam Bihar in Chittagong district. The Bangladesh Buddhist Federation said police took appropriate action as soon as they were informed of the incident.

In November a mob of approximately 20,000 in Rangpur set fire to and vandalized approximately 30 private homes belonging to the local Hindu minority community. The violence followed a Facebook posting demeaning the Prophet Muhammad. A press report stated one person was killed during the incident and five suffered critical injuries.

The mass exodus of Rohingya, the vast majority Muslim, from Burma raised concerns among the Buddhist population about their safety as they feared acts of vengeance from local Muslims. Buddhist organizations formed the Bangladesh United Buddhist Forum in September in the face of perceived threats. The forum organized a human chain in Dhaka on September 8, held a news conference on September 10, and submitted a memorandum to the Embassy of Burma in Dhaka urging the Burmese government to stop atrocities against the Rohingya and resolve its issues through "holistic Buddhist peaceful means." The forum announced local Buddhist community leaders would curtail spending in observance of two approaching religious festivals and instead allocate the funding for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Similarly, Hindu leaders urged community members to reduce expenses related to the October Hindu festival Durga Puja and divert the money to Rohingya welfare. According to media reports, a group of Islamic clerics reached out to Rohingya Hindus, who also fled from Rakhine to Cox's Bazar.

At year's end, law enforcement had yet to conclude its investigation into the October 2016 attack on Hindu homes and temples in Brahmanbaria District. Attackers injured more than 100 individuals and vandalized 52 Hindu homes and 15 temples in response to a Hindu resident's Facebook post showing a Hindu deity

pasted over the Kaaba in Mecca. The National Human Rights Commission stated the attack was orchestrated to drive Hindus from the area to obtain their land. Of the 104 persons detained for suspected involvement in the attacks, all but one was released on bail.

NGOs continued to report tensions in the CHT between the predominantly Muslim Bengali settlers and members of indigenous groups, primarily Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian, largely over land ownership. The government continued to work to resolve land ownership disputes with an amendment to the existing law that provides for more inclusive decision making and a harmonization of the law with the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord.

According to the Bangladesh Christian Association, Muslim real estate investors, in collusion with local government officials, tried to seize land belonging to a Christian family in Miton Village near Dhaka on May 24. The investors launched repeated attacks on the Christian family and physically injured some family members.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy staff met with officials from the Office of the Prime Minister, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, and local government representatives to underscore the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. They discussed the interface between religion, religious freedom, and violent extremism and the importance of integrating religious freedom and other human rights in security policy. Embassy officials stressed the importance of respecting religious minorities' viewpoints and protecting such minorities from extremist attacks.

Embassy officials also met with government officials to discuss protection and humanitarian assistance for the approximately 700,000 Rohingya who crossed into the country from Burma during the year. The Ambassador and other embassy officials visited refugee camps and makeshift settlements in Cox's Bazar to hear directly from Rohingya refugees about their experiences.

As part of community policing training, the embassy encouraged law enforcement officials to protect the rights of religious minorities.

Embassy officials attended public religious events demonstrating religious tolerance among religious groups. The Buddhist community invited the

Ambassador to be a special guest at the occasion of Holy Kathin Cibor Danustan. Embassy officials attended a Puja festival and Diwali festival in honor of the country's Hindu community. The Ambassador also attended a government-sponsored interreligious and ecumenical gathering for peace during Pope Francis' November 30-December 2 visit to the country. In all these events, the Ambassador and other embassy officials emphasized the importance of religious tolerance and respect for diversity.

Embassy and other U.S. government officials expressed support for religious minorities. Embassy officials met regularly with a wide range of religious organizations and representatives, including the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, Bangladesh Christian Association, Buddhist Religious Welfare Trust, Christian Religious Welfare Trust, apostolic nuncio, Bangladesh Buddhist Federation, Chittagong Hill Tracts Land Commission, Bangladesh Purja Celebration Committee, Baitur Rouf Jame Mosque, Imamat Day of Aga Khan, Cox's Bazar Model Women's Kamil Madrassa, and Sheema Bihar Temple. In these meetings, embassy and other U.S. government officials and representatives from the various groups discussed the state of religious freedom in the country, identified challenges religious minorities encountered, and discussed the importance of religious tolerance.

Embassy officials met regularly with a working group of 11 foreign missions to discuss a broad range of human rights concerns, including religious freedom.

To encourage civil society's respect for religious pluralism in the country, the embassy facilitated the participation of representatives of several madrassahs and a professor from the Islamic University in Kushtia in an exchange program on religious education in the U.S. The overarching objective of the program was to explore the role of religion and religious freedom in a multicultural society.