

**Building Peace  
Moving Beyond Conflicts**

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**Pastoral  
Solidarity Visit  
to  
Bangladesh**



**Christian Conference of Asia**

**Report of the  
Pastoral Solidarity Visit to  
Bangladesh**

**7 – 11 May, 2017**



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## Foreword

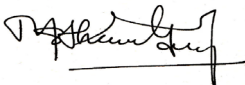
Bangladesh, a country once known for its secular credentials, now experiences a frightening atmosphere. Hatred and terror have spread in several parts of the country. Religious minorities in Bangladesh are forced to live amidst deeply embedded intolerance. Politicisation of religion and religionisation of politics perpetuated by religious and political leaders of the country have destroyed the long cherished values and traditions of religious harmony and pluralism. Some political parties deliberately use religious sentiments of ordinary people to intensify communal and religious hatred, which has led to widespread tensions and polarizations.

The Pastoral Solidarity Team of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) visited Bangladesh and met with and listened to leaders and members of various civil society, church, non-governmental, governmental, Christian, Muslim, and interfaith organizations and institutions to learn about the current situation prevailing in the country. The members of the CCA team heard numerous stories of persecution and human rights violations in the country against religious minorities, especially since the 2014 national elections. During the elections, several villages inhabited by religious minorities were attacked. The CCA team was told of instances in which individuals and groups associated with pro-Islamist extremist groups and political parties looted and burned properties and residences owned by Hindus, Christians and Buddhists.

The CCA has a long tradition of expressing its solidarity with the people and communities who are living in vulnerable conditions. By conducting Pastoral Solidarity Team Visits, the CCA engages in public witness and expresses its solidarity with the persecuted religious minorities as well as members of churches in the CCA fellowship. It is also an opportunity to hear the pleas of the churches, and witness the degree to which they suffer discrimination, threats, and attacks to the safety of their well-being, lives, and property.

The report contains information gathered by the team during the visit, especially about the situation of the minorities who are struggling to live in freedom with dignity and rights. The report also suggests recommendations of the team to undertake follow-up actions by international ecumenical bodies. We stand with the religious minorities, especially the churches in Bangladesh for their endurance and advocate for their human dignity and rights.

*"If one part of the body suffers, every part suffers with it." (1 Cor. 12:26).*



Mathews George Chunakara  
General Secretary, CCA

## **Introduction**

The participants of this Ecumenical Solidarity Visit comprised of two representatives of CCA. The members of the delegation engaged in fellowship, witness, and solidarity through dialogue with churches, the National Council of Churches in Bangladesh (NCCB), and various civil society organizations on issues and interfaith cooperation.

## **Objectives**

1. To understand the current economic, political, cultural, and social situation in Bangladesh today;
2. To learn about the strategies of the Bangladeshi government to combat terrorism;
3. To accompany and be in solidarity with the churches and communities facing persecution and religiously motivated violence in Bangladesh; and,
4. To recommend policies to the government of Bangladesh that will promote and protect the rights of religious minorities

## **Programme of Activities of Pastoral Solidarity Team Visit**

The programmes of the team included the following:

- a. Visit to member churches of CCA: Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha (BBCS), Church of Bangladesh (COB), and the National Council of Churches in Bangladesh (NCCB)
- b. Courtesy call to the Roman Catholic Archbishop Sarat Gomes and Auxiliary Bishop Theotoneous Gomes to get views of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Bangladesh (CBCB) and United Forum of Churches in Bangladesh (UFCB)
- c. A meeting with inter-faith and interreligious leaders: Sunni Muslims, Shi'ite Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists, and other religious minorities
- d. Bangladesh Human Rights Commission
- e. Bangladesh Women's Council
- f. Young Women's Christian Association (YMCA)&Young Men's Christian Association (YWCA)
- g. National Council of Churches in Bangladesh (NCCB)



## **Report of the Findings of the Pastoral Solidarity Team Visit**

A country of the South, Bangladesh is a poor country with a population of over 170 million. While declaring secularism as a fundamental principle, the Constitution upholds Islam as the state religion. Approximately 89% of the population is Muslim, whereas the rest are Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and others.

Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh has made substantial improvements toward a more thriving and pluralistic society. Despite the reduction in population growth, Bangladesh is a very densely populated country. While health conditions and education have improved, poverty is still widespread. Infrastructure needs to be improved, labour rights and workplace safety need to be improved; the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory which caused the death of many workers in 2013 is a case in point.

Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy which is secular and pluralistic. While the civil government maintains supremacy over the military and police forces, the nation, which was once a progressive society, has become a breeding ground for religious extremism.

During the parliamentary elections in January 2014 that were marred by violence, the Awami League, which was in opposition to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), retained political power. During that time, minority-dominated villages were the worst attacked places in Bangladesh. Individuals and groups associated with the BNP and the main Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat) targeted religious minorities, during which they looted and burned Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist properties.

Violent groups which claim to be affiliated with Da'esh and al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) commit atrocities such as killing high-profile victims including religious minorities, foreigners, professors, human rights activists and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) community. In response, the government has waged a strong anti-terrorism campaign which, human rights organizations assert has led to increased political killings, arbitrary arrests and detentions with the intent of extortion, involuntary disappearances, torture, and other human rights violations. The government uses counter-terrorism efforts as an excuse to justify the limitation of civil and political rights.

The most serious human rights abuses include extrajudicial executions,

unlawful detentions; involuntary disappearances by the actions of the security forces of the government; the terrorists' killing of people who belong to marginalized group; early and forced marriage; gender-based violence, which specifically affects women and children; poor working conditions; and violations of labour rights.

Other human rights concerns include torture, cruel punishments, illegal arrests, involuntary disappearances, lack of independence of the judiciary, prolonged pre-trial detention, politically motivated violence, corruption, and limitations on online speech and the press.

There are countless reports of security forces committing abuses with impunity. The government took some action to investigate and prosecute security forces who committed abuses and killings. Due to the citizens' distrust of security forces, people tend neither to approach the government for help nor to report incidents of crime. In many cases, the government blames the victims of terrorist attacks, thereby increasing the impunity of aggressors.

For this reason, the poor, religious and ethnic minorities, and all those who do not espouse the mainstream Sunni Muslim beliefs in Bangladesh, live through intolerance and persecution.

### **Rise of Political Islam**

Three home-grown groups that sow terror in Bangladesh include (1) the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, (2) the Harkat-ul-Jihal al-Islami, and (3) the Ansarullah Bangla Team. Established in 1998, the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen is an Islamic organization. It was declared illegal in 2005 during which the organization perpetrated bomb attacks. Another terrorist group banned in 2005 was the Harkat-ul-Jihad al Islami which engaged in grenade and bomb attacks. Starting 2013, there has been a spate of religiously inspired attacks on liberal Muslims, religious minorities, including Shiite Muslim minorities, secularist, and atheist publishers and bloggers, LGBT rights and other activists. Out of the over 30 such attacks, ISIL claims responsibility for 21 of them. The Ansarullah Bangla Team claims responsibility for some of the terrorist attacks occurring in Bangladesh. Dabiq, which is the ISIS magazine, published an article in November 2015 which clamors for the "revival of jihad in Bengal."

Terrorism and religiously inspired violence are on the rise in Bangladesh. For instance, ISIS in Bangladesh, which is called the Caliphate of Bangladesh,



emerged from a small band of terrorists killing individuals at the international stage. The list of religious minorities being attacked gets longer by the day. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as Da'esh, and Al Qaeda have claimed responsibility for multiple attacks in Bangladesh.

Such attacks include the killing of over 20 persons, including hostages who were mostly foreigners, on July 1, 2016, in a bakery favored by foreigners in Gulshan Thana which is located in the diplomatic enclave in Dhaka. Here, the terrorists used crude bombs, guns, and machetes. The terrorists said they intentionally targeted citizens of "Crusader countries." Eyewitnesses said that those who could not recite verses from the Qur'an were tortured and killed. Bangladeshis who had U.S. accents were tortured as well. The Bangladeshi government said the perpetrators were members of the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, a group not connected with ISIL. Being the worst terrorist attack in the country, the local media tagged the Gulshan bakery mass killing as the 7/16 of Bangladesh. The group threatens to continue the attacks.

### **Religious Intolerance and Persecution against Christians and Religious Minorities**

Out of the 169 million people in Bangladesh, 90% are Sunni Muslim; 9.5% are Hindu; and all other faiths, including Christianity, Theravada Buddhism, Shi'ite Muslims, Bahá'ís, animists, Ahmadi Muslims, agnostics, and atheists account for less than 1%. Extremist violence is a major issue and efforts are needed to defeat extremism. Extremists intimidated, threatened, harassed, assaulted, and killed religious minorities, atheists, and secular bloggers in 2015. Christian, Hindu, Shi'ite, Buddhist, and other minorities were threatened, attacked, and killed. Churches, temples, and Shi'ite mosques were attacked. Citizens, religious groups, and civil society organizations are afraid that increasing religious extremism will lead to further menaces and attacks.

Jogeswar Roy, a senior Hindu priest, was beheaded and two worshipers were wounded on February 21, 2016. Nikhil Joarder, a Hindu tailor, was hacked to death on April 30, 2016. Islamists hacked to death Mohammad Shahdullah, a minority Sufi Muslim, on May 7, 2016. Buddhist monk Shue U Chak, 75 years old, was hacked to death on May 14, 2016; Sunil Gomes, a Christian, was hacked to death at his grocery store on June 5, 2016. Islamists slit the throat of Ananda Gopal Ganguly on June 7, 2016. Nityaranjan Pande, a worker at a Hindu monastery over 60 years old, was hacked to death on June 10, 2016. Ripon Charkavarti, a Hindu college teacher, was attacked

with machete knives in his home on June 15, 2016. The Sholakya Eid Congregation was attacked. Avijit Roy, a well-known atheist, was hacked to death in Dhaka.

On October 3, 2015, Kunio Hoshi, a Japanese national, was shot dead in the northern district of Rangpur. On 28 September 2015, an Italian aid worker Cesare Tavella was shot dead at the Gulshan diplomatic enclave in Dhaka.

On 14 November 2015, three unidentified assailants riding a motorcycle in Dinajpur, swept past Italian priest Fr. Piero Parolari when he was cycling on his way to the St. Vincent Hospital. They shot at him, the reason for which remains unknown. Parolari had been living in Bangladesh for about thirty years and had been working as a medical doctor for about 12 years at that time. Daesch claimed responsibility for the shooting of Parolari, stating that its members used a gun with silencer to attack him. Daesch also stated that they had attacked a member of the Baha'i community and killed Rahman Ali who was a politician.

Another Catholic priest has become the innocent victim of death threats. Fr. Karlus Toppo, from the Church of Christ the King in Nijpara, about 35 kilometres from Dinajpur, received a text message, allegedly from Daesch, threatening his life. At least twelve Protestant and Catholic clergymen have received death threats through text messages. Ten Baptist pastors received a letter which issued a death threat. On 26 November 2015, a Shiite mosque in Bogra district was attacked.

The activities of Daesch in Bangladesh coincide with a rise in the militancy of Islam in Bangladesh. Daesch claimed responsibility for several attacks and acts of violence in Bangladesh but there is no certainty that Daesch was actually involved in the attacks. There is a power struggle among factional divisions among the local terrorist groups. People who are not Sunni Muslims, including Shiite Muslims, Christians, and atheist bloggers are being persecuted, some of whom have been hacked to death.

## **Land Grabbing**

In addition, religious minorities are vulnerable to illegal land grabbing, causing ownership disputes to become rampant. Attacks on religious minorities are attributed to or claimed by the domestic group Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) and the international Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), even while the Bangladeshi government denies the existence of ISIL. On the one hand, the government and Sunni religious clerics have publicly

condemned the atrocities committed against religious minorities. On the other hand, some political parties use religiously-contentious language and actions that intensify communal and religious tensions for their own political advantages.

The leaders of the Church of Bangladesh (COB) stated that “as minorities, Christians of Bangladesh are facing persecution now more than ever. Among all the problems, land grabbing and extortion in the rural areas must get attention right now.”

### **Vested Property Act**

Another major issue in Bangladesh is the Vested Property Act, which gives the Government the right to appropriate property from persons who are considered enemies of the state. The law was called the Enemy Property Act prior to the independence of Bangladesh. Human rights organisations are opposed to this Act as it is used as an instrument to confiscate the lands of ethnic and religious minorities.

For instance, when Hindu families leave Bangladesh for economic or political reasons, such as religious persecution, they are called enemies for which reason they can be deprived of their property, as the government seizes their land and belongings. The Vested Property Act affected roughly forty percent of Hindu families in Bangladesh composed of 925,050 households, including about 750,000 families deprived of agricultural land. Since 1948, seventy-five percent of the land of religious minorities in the then East Pakistan has been confiscated. Most of the land confiscation took place from 1972 to 1980. Hindu families lost a total of about one million six hundred forty thousand acres of land, which represents fifty-three per cent of the total land the Hindu minority owns.

More than seven hundred acres or roughly three thousand square kilometers of cultivable land were listed as enemy property. All the major political parties benefitted from appropriated lands. The period from 1972 to 1980 was the time during which most of the properties of religious minorities were expropriated. The implementation of the Vested Property Act is the reason for which the population of the religious and ethnic minorities has decreased by sixteen percent, which totaled 11 million people.

Due to the discriminatory nature of the Act, human rights groups in Bangladesh and abroad oppose this law and calls for its repeal, especially as the seizure of property leads to political disenfranchisement, internal displacement, and emigration.

## **Religious Extremists attack Professors, Publishers and Secular Bloggers**

Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Ansar al Islam, and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) have claimed responsibility for killing at least four Bangladeshis for writing about secularism, freedom of thought, religious harmony, communal tolerance, political accountability, and government transparency. Many bloggers fled their residences or the country, because they were on the hit list for assassination.

Several secular activists were hacked to death in broad daylight. Bio-Engineer Dr. Avijit Roy, a blogger, and his wife Bonya Ahmed were attacked on February 26, 2015. Oyasiqur Rhaman, a blogger, was killed on March 30, 2015. Four masked men killed Ananta Buoy Das, an atheist blogger, in Sylhet on May 12, 2016. Nilandri Chattopadhyay Niloy, a blogger, was killed on August 7, 2015. Faisal Arefin Dipan, publisher of Jagriti Prakashani, was hacked to death on October 31, 2015. Professor A. F. M. Rezaul Karim Siddique was hacked to death on April 23, 2016. Mir Sanaur Rahman, a village doctor, was hacked to death and Saifuzzaman, a university teacher, was wounded on May 20, 2016. On April 6, 2016, Islamists killed Nazimuddin Samad, a law student and a liberal blogger who criticized Islamic fundamentalism. Avijit Roy, a well-known atheist blogger, was hacked to death in Dhaka.

## **Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and Northern Districts**

There have always been regular movements of people in what is now known as Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar. In 1993, about 56,000 Chakma refugees from Tripura in India were repatriated to the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, people belong to 12 tribes with a grand total of about 1 million indigenous peoples. Among the distinct indigenous communities are the Bawm, Chak, Chakma, Khumi, Khyang, Lushai, Marma, Mro, Pankhua, Tanchangya, and Tripura. The language and features of the people from these tribes are more similar to those in Myanmar. The tribal peoples here speak distinct Tibeto-Burmese languages, not dissimilar to the Burmese and Assamese languages. The Bangladeshi government's policy of resettling Bengalis in this region led to religious and ethnic troubles, resulting in a tribal insurgency.

Ethnic minorities, who espouse minority religions, including Christianity, Buddhist, Hindu, and traditional religions, live in the CHT. A major problem in CHT is land ownership. The Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of

Human Rights (BSEHR) exposed that 61.44 % of the indigenous peoples face discrimination, 41.86% are victims of corruption, and 18.67% have been evicted from their ancestral domain. However, it takes on religious overtones as a consequence of tensions between the Muslim majority on the one hand, and Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian tribal people on the other hand. Unfounded accusations that minorities want to establish an autonomous Christian state lead to police and military monitoring the activities of Christians.

## **Rohingya Muslims**

Rohingya Muslims are neither officially recognized citizens of Myanmar nor Bangladesh. Myanmar rejects them while Bangladesh does not want them. They are stateless people. From about 1991 to 1992, roughly 265,000 Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar moved to Bangladesh in an effort to run away from repression, which included rape, torture, and killing. The Rohingya Muslims suffer mass atrocities in the hands of security forces in the northern Rakhine state in Myanmar. In 2017, about half a million Rohingya Muslims who live in appalling circumstances outside the refugee camps are considered illegals and have no access to any social service. The majority of the refugees live along the Teknaf-Cox's Bazar Highway which parallels the Naf River which is the border of Bangladesh with Myanmar. Only those who obtain identification cards from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) will have better access to education and health care. Bangladesh has formally recognized and hosted only 32,000 Rohingya Muslim refugees in the refugee camps in border areas who have fled religious persecution in Myanmar. These refugees have registered with the government of Bangladesh and the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). Hundreds of refugees are detained and forcefully sent back to an uncertain fate in Myanmar. The government of Bangladesh calls for Myanmar to take back the Rohingya refugees.

Cardinal Patrick D'Rozario of Bangladesh pointed out that the Rohingya Muslims "have a right to live where they have been living. But now they are refugees. The Rohingya are being denied the right to habitation, they are living in desperate conditions and they are frustrated. Refugees have a right to live with dignity and security."

On the Church's International Day of Prayer and Awareness against Human Trafficking, Pope Francis said: the Rohingya Muslims "have been suffering, they are being tortured and killed, simply because they uphold their Muslim faith. I would like to pray today with you in a special way for our brothers

and sisters Rohingya. They are driven out of Myanmar, going from one place to another because they're not wanted. They're good people, peaceful! They aren't Christians, they're good [people]. They're brothers and sisters of ours."

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Summary of the Findings**

Despite having made great strides in improving its economy, Bangladesh experiences abject poverty, for which reason many work with limited labour rights in factories that produce export commodities. The recent elections that were characterized by violence have adversely affected religious minorities. Legal and underground religious extremists persecute religious minorities, including land grabbing and the killing of tolerant-minded bloggers. Stateless Rohingya Muslims are only allowed to stay in refugee camps, which are in dismal shape. In addition, violence against women has increased in Bangladesh. The communal conflict Bangladesh is facing today, which breeds religiously motivated terrorism, is a product of political conflicts. If extremism were to be reduced, the political conflicts, which include discrimination and land grabbing, must be addressed and put to a halt.

Through the Pastoral Solidarity Visit to Bangladesh, the CCA witnessed, accompanied, and expressed its solidarity to the religious and ethnic minorities who face religiously inspired discrimination and violence.

The team learned first-hand that churches in Bangladesh stand in solidarity with all the religious and ethnic minorities. They stand for the rights of the minorities, raising their voice against fanaticism. They hold interfaith dialogues and joint actions as well as organize such diverse activities as protest actions, rallies, human chains, and press conferences. The ecumenical movement in Bangladesh works closely together where all the Christian churches come under one umbrella to work for greater peace and harmony in society.

During our field visits and dialogues, we learned from various interfaith leaders about the situation in Bangladesh and how they work for harmony and peace based on justice. For example, leaders of the Church of Bangladesh stressed that "Christians of Bangladesh as members of the minority are facing persecution today more than ever. Land grabbing and extortion are among the crimes commonly perpetrated against Christians in the rural areas."



Rev. David A. Das, the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in Bangladesh (NCCB) identified the following as the causes of the rise of fundamentalist extremism: poverty, social injustice, social inequality, discrimination, intolerance of people who do not belong to the dominant Sunni Islamic faith, and the lack of dialogue among people of different social status, faiths, cultures, and religions.

“For about ten years now, we are facing extremist religious leaders who brainwash children and students. What curriculum are they using in the madrasa or missionary schools? We must be more careful. Due to lengthy tribunal processes, we are experiencing a back log in hearing rising crime cases in courts of law. We demand separate tribunals for religious crimes,” noted Hemanta I. Corraya, the general secretary of Bangladesh Christian Association.

“All religious problems are not as we know them; many of them are actually political. There are also climate issues, drug issues, and other problems,” observed Theophil Rozario, foreign affairs secretary of the Bangladesh Christian Association.

Dr. Kazi Reazul Hoque, Chair of the National Human Rights Commission, stated that “the Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh now proactively takes a strong position against religious extremism.”

Leaders of the Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha indicated that Christians in hill tract areas have no ownership of their land, for which reason they are persecuted by the settlers and local leaders from the majority faith. In addition, many evangelists who are in those areas are now facing more challenges and threats from newly emerged religious extremists.

Juliet K. Malakar, an executive member of NCCB, said that “for a couple of decades now, we are experiencing outside forces that are dividing the unity among our people in Bangladesh who belong to different faiths. We need to stay together and act together against such evil forces.”

Shamim Mohhammad Afzal, the Director General of the Islamic Foundation, explained that “the people of this land have always dwelt in peace and harmony. We are united despite our cultural and religious diversity. We must stay that way to confront religious extremists.”

Mohammad Abdur Razzaq, the Principal of Madinatul ulim Kamil Madrasah, is confident that “right now, interfaith dialogue is one of the most effective methods for re-establishing interfaith harmony and just peace in Bangladesh.”

Bishop Shorot Francis Gomes, who is the Auxiliary Bishop of Dhaka, pointed out that “the Catholic Church and community are always working to establish peace and harmony in the society as well as to build a bridge of mutual understanding with people from other faiths.”

Bishop Theotonius Gomes, the Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus of Dhaka, shared that they “work closely with the Protestant Churches through the United Forum of Church in Bangladesh, where all the Christian Churches come under one umbrella to work for great peace and harmony in society.”

Sanjeeb Chowdhury, co-chair of Shorbo Dhormio Shompriti Shabha (Organisation for Communal Harmony of All Faiths) noted that “the communal conflict we are facing is a product of political conflicts. If we want to reduce extremism, we must improve our morality through religious norms.”

“In cities, we are leading comfortable lives, but in rural areas, minorities are very much discriminated and victims of many crimes. We need to take this dialogue program to rural and remote areas as well,” remarked Hubert Gomes, Advisor of the Bangladesh Christian Association.

Women’s organizations work for the rights of all women in Bangladesh. Merelin Keka Adhikari, NCCB Department of Women committee member, indicated that recently, violence against women had increased in Bangladesh. She appealed to interfaith leaders to work together to resolve this issue by stepping forward and doing something about it.

Said Advocate Rakhi Das Purkayastha, the Joint General Secretary of the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad: “Bangladesh Mahila Parishad is not only focusing on women’s rights but also providing advocacy support and spread awareness about human rights. Recently, we suggested the government to adopt a marriage law that provides legal support for women.”

Mrs. Monisha Sarker, the General Secretary of the National YWCA of Bangladesh, reminded us that “instead of simply talking, we all should act more and involve everyone working for a just society that has greater impact on society.”

Ms. Renu Bowl, moderator of the Dept. of Women, NCCB and member of Gospel Baptist Church, commented that “our personal lives send powerful messages to people of other faiths. We need to reflect the spirit of interfaith harmony and peace in our lives if we are compelled to establish it.”

Mr. Nipun Sangma, the General Secretary of the National YMCA of Bangladesh, held that “each and every Christian should come together and build a mutual understanding along with greater unity to establish a society with peace and justice.”

Mufti Hafijur Rahaman, Head Muhaddes, Hazrat Abu Bakar Siddiq (R) Kamil Madrasah, asserted that “we need to know our own religion. If people know their own religions and respect them, then they can respect the religions of others. If we could live in a harmonious environment, then there will be no unrest. But we are experiencing this conflict, because we do not have proper knowledge of our own religions and the religions of others.”

“Extremism is disturbing the community frequently. To fight it, people from different faiths need to be united in their actions,” remarked Mr. David C. R. Biswas, an executive member of NCCB.

Milon Kanti Datta, Vice President of the Bangladesh Puja Udjapon Parishad, believes that “social awareness should be our main approach so that parents take care of their children to be more kind to others and to respect others’ religions.”

Augustin Dipok Karmaker, an executive member of NCCB and the treasurer of CCA wisely reflected: “My first identity is my humanity, then comes my faith. Sometimes religion is the dividing factor in humanity. It brings criticism among faiths. If I don’t respect my own religion, how can I respect other religions?”

Rev. Dr. HWB Sumakul of the CCA team observed: “We need to be more human than to be more religious. Dialogue is a compulsory requirement to resolve conflicts, to avoid war, and to establish just-peace in society.”

“We have to stimulate the masses of the people to be active in eradicating religious or communal conflicts by uniting themselves,” commented Mr. Suklal Halder, an executive member of NCCB.

Nirmol Kumar Chatterjee, the joint secretary of the Bangladesh Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Oikko Parishad, indicated that the “number of minorities, especially Hindus in Bangladesh are decreasing day by day. We have to join hands with people of other faiths to establish a peaceful country and to regain communal harmony.”

Sharif Bayzid Mahmud, the general secretary of Shorbo Dhormio Shompriti Shabha (Organization for Communal Harmony of All Faiths) commented:

“Allah said, I have created you from a single father and then I diversified you into different cultures so that you re-discover and understand yourselves. So we need more dialogues to understand one another and resolve conflicts and confusions.”

Dr. Rey Ty of the CCA team commented: “We need to work with several stakeholders, including social activists, human rights organisations, women’s organisations, and humanitarian organisations. We need to build up an advocacy team of lawyers and paralegal workers who will work for the rights of the religious and ethnic minorities and the oppressed. We cannot do everything individually and organizationally and be on the frontline all the time but we can work with or create groups who can support and work for the empowerment of victims and survivors.”

### **Condemnation**

A cruel and heinous crime, terrorism is a global scourge. Terrorism in all its forms and manifestations is a grave menace to international peace and security. The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) expresses its concerns over and condemns religiously inspired violence in the strongest possible terms. Extremists are maligning religions when they engage in torture, hostage taking, and killings. We denounce those who strive to rationalize violence in the name of the faith. We reject fear and despair.

### **Witness, Accompaniment, and Solidarity**

The senseless violence against innocent victims in Bangladesh, which is an offense to God and humankind, deeply saddens the CCA. Having witnessed the conditions of the minorities, the CCA expresses its deep shock, shares the pain of the Bangladeshi people, and is united in our tears and love for the victims and survivors of acts of violence in Bangladesh. The CCA partakes in the sorrow of the relatives of the departed ones. We stand in solidarity with the minorities for the justice owed to the victims of these acts of atrocity. We express our most sincere condolences to the families and loved ones of the victims of these atrocities.

### **Recommendations**

1. CCA shares the belief that Islam is a religion of peace. We, people from different faiths, must be united in our actions to counter religious extremism. First, we have to be more human than religious. Our first identity is our humanity, after which comes our faith.

2. We need to focus on extremism against religious and ethnic minorities and understand how it is being exploited in order to be able to take a solid grounded stand against it. Interfaith dialogue is one of the most effective methods for re-establishing interfaith harmony and peace based on justice in Bangladesh.
3. Christians should come together and build mutual understanding along with greater unity to establish a society with peace and justice. Our personal lives send powerful messages to people of other faiths. For this reason, we need to reflect the spirit of interfaith harmony and peace in our lives, if we are to establish it.
4. The church and the communities need to always work together to establish peace and harmony in society, building a bridge of mutual understanding with people from other faiths.
5. Dialogue is a necessary component of conflict resolution and to establish peace based on justice. People in the cities live comfortable lives. However, minorities are discriminated and are victims or survivors of countless crimes in rural areas. Bangladeshis need to take interfaith dialogue to rural and remote areas as well.
6. Since independence, the people of Bangladesh have always lived in peace and harmony. They were united despite diversity in their cultures and religions. But for a couple of decades, Bangladesh has been experiencing outside influences that are dividing the unity among people of different faiths in Bangladesh. The people need to stay and act together to counter these negative forces. Bangladeshis need to stay united in order to confront religious extremism.
7. Consciousness raising and social awareness must be our main approach so that people of different faiths will learn to be more kind to people of other faiths and to respect the religions of others.
8. The number of minorities in Bangladesh is decreasing. Minorities have to join hands with people of other faiths to establish a peaceful country and to regain communal harmony. Together, all should act and involve everyone to work towards a just society.
9. The government needs to ensure the safety and security of religious and ethnic minorities through all means, including pro-active efforts to educate the general public about secularism and to provide protection to the minorities.
10. All sectors need to join hands to repel the pressures that terrorism poses

to the world community. We have to stimulate the masses of the people to unite among themselves so that they can be active in eradicating religious or communal conflicts.

11. We support the efforts of the Bangladesh government to restrain militancy, to counter violent extremism, and to eradicate the scourge of terrorism. Perpetrators of terrorist attacks must be brought to justice. On the one hand, the government needs to provide training on international human rights principles proactively which provides for the recognition and respect for the rights of minorities. On the other hand, the government also needs to denounce and investigate religiously motivated land-grabbing and violence reactively.
12. Given the scale of the crisis, the world cannot stay in a state of inaction with respect to the plight of the Rohingya Muslims. We cannot sit by and watch genocide and crimes against humanity happen to the Rohingya Muslims. We need to take comprehensive actions to solve the refugee crisis. Some measures include: investigate allegations of abuses, provide humanitarian assistance, end the persecution and abuses of human rights, and lift restrictions to the freedom of movement.



## **APPENDIX**

### **CCA News Release**

#### **Religious minorities in Bangladesh victims of intolerance and persecution, observes CCA's pastoral solidarity visit team**

Posted on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017

“Bangladesh’s religious minorities have been facing attacks since the 2014 national election. During the elections, minority-dominated villages were the worst attacked places, where individuals and groups associated with pro-Islamist parties looted and burned properties and residences owned by members of Hindu, Christian and Buddhist religions in different parts of the country. Some political parties deliberately used the religious sentiments of ordinary people to intensify communal and religious tensions and polarisations for political advantages,” a pastoral solidarity team of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) was told by representatives of different religious groups in Bangladesh.

“In the last two years alone, at least eight secular bloggers, publishers and rights’ activists have been killed for writing about freedom of thought, religious harmony, communal tolerance and political accountability,” told civil society organisation representatives to the CCA team.

The CCA organised a Pastoral Solidarity Visit from 7 – 11 May 2017 to accompany the churches and communities facing religiously motivated violence in Bangladesh. The solidarity team consisted of Rev. Dr. Henny William Booth Sumakul, Head of the Gereja Masehi Injili di Minahasa (Christian Evangelical Church in Minahasa) – GMIM, Indonesia and a member of the CCA Programme Committee and Dr. Reynaldo Racaza Ty, CCA Programme Coordinator for Prophetic Diakonia and Advocacy.

During the four-day visit, the solidarity team engaged in interactions with various civil society organisations, representatives of minority religious groups, churches, ecumenical organisations and social and human rights activists in the country.

Members of the solidarity team were told that minorities in Bangladesh live in the midst of terror and fear. Extremist violence has been a recurring problem in the country, where religious minorities are intimidated, threatened, assaulted and killed by Islamic extremists’ intent on silencing dissenting voices.

Out of the 169 million people in Bangladesh, 90 percent are Sunni Muslims; 9.5 percent of them belong to the Hindu religion; and all other faiths,

including Christians, Theravada Buddhists, Shi'ite and Ahmadi Muslims, account for less than 1 percent of the total population.

As a direct result of the frequent spate of attacks by extremist groups in the country, religious minorities in Bangladesh are also vulnerable to illegal land grabbing. At least 431,000 people continue to live in displacement as a result of past conflicts and ongoing violence in the country. Indigenous people and religious minorities have been disproportionately affected by this violence and the resulting protracted and new displacement.

Ecumenical and church leaders in Bangladesh echoed their concerns over the troubling rise in violence in the country and informed the members of the CCA solidarity team about the plight of the suffering communities.

The CCA solidarity team met with leaders of the National Council of Churches in Bangladesh (NCCB), the Catholic Bishops Conference of Bangladesh (CBCB), the Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha (BBCS), the Church of Bangladesh (COB), and the United Forum of Churches in Bangladesh (UFCB) and heard stories about the suffering of religious minorities in the country.

The team also met with the leadership of the National Human Rights Commission, the Bangladesh Islamic Foundation (BIF), the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), the Christian Association & Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Unity Council and the YWCA & YMCA in Bangladesh. During discussions with interfaith religious leaders, Dr. Reynaldo Racaza Ty said, "In the face of religious-inspired violence in Bangladesh it is heartening to note that different religious groups are working closely to promote inter-religious cooperation and harmony."

## Field Visits and Dialogue



National Human Rights Commission



Discussion with interreligious leaders



Bangladesh Women's Council



Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh and the United Forum of Churches in Bangladesh (CBCB-UFCB)



Church of Bangladesh (CoB)



Islamic Foundation



Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha (BBCS)



YWCA & YMCA





# Pastoral Solidarity Visit to Bangladesh

*“If one part of the body suffers, every part suffers with it”*

*(1 Cor: 12:26)*

“The Pastoral Solidarity Visit organised by CCA to Bangladesh was continuation of CCA’s journey of accompaniment with the marginalized in vulnerable situations in Asia. The CCA team met with and listened to leaders and members of various civil society, church, non-governmental, governmental, Christian, Muslim and other interfaith organisations and institutions to learn about the situation prevailing in Bangladesh.”



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