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The Need for a Secular, Non-Discriminatory, Tolerant, Democratic Bangladesh and South Asia¹

Good Morning.

I express my gratitude to Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Co-chairs Congressman Wolf and Congressman McGovern for organizing this hearing.

This topic is very dear to me as my minority Hindu family is a victim of religious ethnic cleansing, as is my wife's family. She lost her mother – a secondary victim of partition – when she was a toddler. Moreover I teach a course called “Politics of India and South Asia” and another course called “Human Rights.” I have traveled, written and lectured widely in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Pakistani Kashmir. As you suggested I will primarily focus my comments on the plight of Hindu and other non-Muslim minorities in Bangladesh since the days of 1947 Indian partition, and her prospect for tolerance and pluralism without which there cannot be any democracy. I will also add anecdotes of the Communist-run West Bengal State in India which in my mind is also a communal party as many in Indian Bengali left tends to be. Communists were recently ousted by Miss Mamata Banerji. Bangladesh and West Bengal together was the secular united Province of Bengal in Colonial British India. After partition one headed towards intolerant Islamism and the other toward intolerant Communism. I have been working on these issues for over many decades having authored many books and articles,

¹ I will be happy to provide documentation of data/incidents related to my statements. Most of the data on killings and displacement till 2001 are from my book *Empire's Last Casualty: Indian Subcontinent's Vanishing Hindu and Other Minorities*, Firma KLM Publishers, 2008, Kolkata (Calcutta), India

including *Empire's Last Casualty: Indian Subcontinent's Vanishing Hindu and Other Minorities* (2008), *Living among the Believers: Stories from the holy Land Down the Ganges* (2006). My latest book *Ai Bangla Oi Bangla* (This Bengal, that Bengal) was released a few days ago in January of 2012 in India. *Empire's Last Casualty...* documents the loss of 49 million Hindu minorities from Bangladesh Census from 1947 through 2001 Census. Bangladesh's Hindu minority was almost one third of the population in 1947 which is down to less than 10% now in the world's 7th largest nation. Because of this loss Pakistan is now the 6th most populous nation, but in 1971 when Bangladesh was part of (East) Pakistan she had 55% of the population and (West) Pakistan only 45%. This Hindu loss is a politically-incorrect topic both in India and in Bangladesh. Even in Bangladeshi-Hindu refugee-communist-run states of West Bengal and Tripura the discussion of this loss is censored. I repeat the loss is 49 million people, larger than 163 of 189 nations listed in *World Bank's April 2003 World Indicator's Database*. In that period the number of Hindus killed – a very painful topic – is between 1.4 million and 3.1 million, based on high and low counts, which is larger than 75 nations of that database, yet hardly known to anyone. Again it is between 1.4 and 3.1 million Hindus who lost their lives. Mass Hindu killing started on the eve of Indian partition in eastern Noakhali area of Muslim League-run British Bengal Province known as Noakhali Danga Killing when tens of thousands of Hindu girls and wives were also abducted and converted. This killing was stopped only by a one-man army of Mahatma Gandhi. I interviewed for our Documentation Project two of the individuals who went to recover some of the abducted girls there. One interview (R. Datta) is available on YouTube. I head a foundation that helps educate the poor and the orphaned in 15 schools in Bangladesh and 15 more in India. We have build nine schools and dorms in Bangladesh. I also head the Indian Subcontinent Partition Documentation Project which is saving oral history of

refugees, survivors and protectors – from 1947 till today – affected by that British-created partition. Most Bangladeshi Hindus, Buddhists, and tribes now live in India.

Bangladesh is a beautiful, evergreen country. People are very warm to the last individual. Even the most pathological Hindu-haters, infidel-haters, secularist-haters, or *murtad*-haters will welcome you as an individual. Yet there is remorseless oppression going back to the 1946 Noakhali pogrom of our indigenous Hindu minority for their pre-Islamic culture, the heritage of all Bengali Muslims, by the same people. There have always been many majority-Muslim secularists and pro-tolerance activists, but they have always been marginalized. I am saddened by the denial of basic human rights to Hindus by a section of our elites, especially when vast majority killed for the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 were Hindus. A segment of elites are either unaware or unwilling to understand the depth of serious day-to-day harassment, humiliation and institutionalized discrimination directed towards Hindus, and their Buddhist, Christian cousins, and now Ahmadiyahs.

My bias is for a secular state with the same law for all. If we support religious states we won't be able to support democracy with equal rights to all, and rights for the minority. In South Asia the current model of only Hindu-majority states – India and now Nepal – to have secular polity and every other state to be discriminatory Islamic or Buddhist may not work forever. All states in the region have deported their indigenous Hindu minority. Hindus along with Sikhs, Jains, Brahmos and Buddhists were cleansed from Pakistan, Pakistani Kashmir, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Buddhist Sri Lanka, Burma and Bhutan have also deported Hindu minority for India, at times with Christians and Muslims. For prosperity, democracy and human rights all states should be secular and linguistically non-fundamentalist. I do not know if Hindus will remain divided and suicidal-fatalistic forever. In India too Hindus have been cleansed from

Kashmir, (Hindu Reangs from) Mizoram, killed in Assam, (Hindu monks and nuns in) Calcutta, (oppressed-caste Hindu peasants in) Maricjhapi in West Bengal, to name a few.

Bangladesh is the first Muslim-majority country to revolt against an Islamic constitution for a secular one. Three million people gave lives for that cause. Our U.S. Administration supported a military-Islamist genocide, and actively worked against secularism, democracy and tolerance. Now we must support secularism, democracy and tolerance.

A. **2008 Election:** Minorities and secularists were very hopeful of a tolerant Bangladesh to see the rise of pro-secularists through ballot box. (I testified before that election.) How I feel about this change? Let me quote from my recently-released book:

“Recently – 2008 and 2011 – in two Bengals two peaceful revolutions took place through the ballot. Mrs. Hashina Wazed in Bangladesh replaced a narrow, pro-Islam, anti-minority group with huge majority by promising to bring back the Founding Father-created secular Constitution. Because of this promise if Mrs. Wazed received 99% of Hindu-Buddhist vote I will not be surprised. Yet I am reminded of a Bengali saying “*jei jai lankai shei hoi rabon*” or whosoever ascends the throne becomes a demon. During the Bangladesh Independence struggle Awami League Party activists, Muslim non-communal intellectuals and every single Hindu – businessman to beggar – were targets of (Islamist) genocide. According to my research, through information provided by people in the villages and in urban neighborhoods, 90% to 95% of the victims then were Hindu minority. Still the respectable prime minister broke her own and party’s pledge and made the son’s of the soil, pre-Islamic indigenous Hindu, Buddhists and Christians fourth-class citizens of the nations, ignored the sacrifice of the martyrs, and offered the military

Generals Ershad and Zia-created (non-secular) Constitution. Moreover, she kept the preamble written in Arabic. Love of the (Bengali) language was ignored and we disregarded the sacrifices made by Language Martyrs.”²

Now let me talk about the plight of various groups.

B. Hindu Minority: Bangladesh's problem of democracy is not its anti-minority root, but in its shameless anti-Hindu core. Attack on Christians, Buddhists began only after plains and tribal Hindus were decimated. And Attack on Ahmadiya Muslims started after that. As I mentioned before the loss of Hindus from Census is 49 million till 2001; and loss of life is between 1.4 and 3.1 million.

Hindus complain of apartheid maintained against them, meaning denial of hiring of qualified Hindu minority in public service, military, police, Foreign Service, diplomatic corps, border guard and more. The current pro-secular government has promised to open up this hiring. I thank them for that promise. Three years back when several top security officials were killed by the conscripts the noted journalist Abdul Ghaffar Chowdhury, a Muslim, wrote that if only there were 5% Hindus in the armed forces this mutiny wouldn't have happened.

For our Partition Documentation Project we have interviewed scores of Hindu Bangladeshis. Every single family suffered during 1971 anti-Hindu genocide, and persecution didn't end with the independence, except for the first three years after 1971. (Attack of Hindus pujas resumed during this period.) Situation has marginally improved after the last election, but it is still precarious, then came Nandirhat.

² *Ai Bangla, Oi Bangla: Expanded Edition [This Bengal, That Bengal]*, Firma KLM Publisher, Kolkata (Calcutta), 2012

- C. **Buddhists:** Buddhists are a small minority in Bangladesh and initially they were not target of killing and cleansing. During 1971 Liberation War two of the prominent Buddhists were active supporters of the genocide. However, after forced Tibet-style colonization of Chittagong Hills by plains landless Muslim peasants transported by the Government in the 1980s attack on Buddhists started. By the way Chittagong Hills was 99% Hindu--Buddhist till that colonization. Now plight of Buddhist minority parallels Hindu minority. Successive promise of autonomy of Chittagong Hills has not yet materialized.
- D. **Christian Minority:** Christians are a small minority in Bangladesh. They too were completely spared during 1971 War for their presumed connection with the West. During my field work I found that many Christian churches protected Hindus by giving them cross to wear. Yet in Bondabari Mission in Rajshahi where over 300 Hindus took shelter in 1971 Archbishop Ganguly handed Muslim killers 85 Hindu boys and men never to return reminiscent of Rwanda and Bosnia. Christians came under attack only after the First Gulf War. Since then they are facing insecurity and violence like Hindus. The first large scale attack on Christians came at Baniachar in Faridpur District when a church was bombed killing many worshippers. Other acts of violence followed since then. There were attacks at Christian girls' dorm in LakshmiBazar in Dhaka. I just interviewed a Christian couple for our Partition Documentation Project who told us although there was no problem with Christians in 1971 but in their recent visit to their villages they found insecurity and families are searching alternative arrangements for their future.

- E. **Ahmadiyas:** Ahmadiyas are a very small community. Wrath against them was exported from Pakistan. Every now and then there is a call to declare them non-Muslim and attacks on those families and mosques are perpetrated by Islamist extremists. In Chantara Village in Tangail District Ahmadiyas were attacked in August of 2010, eleven of them were injured.
- F. **The Plains and Hill Tribes:** Intertwined with the plains Hindus the plains tribes, mostly Hindu with small Christian minority, faced same wraths from the days of partition. As mentioned hill tribes have come under attack and colonization after their displacement when the Kaptai Lake was built, and Muslim settlers were brought in by the Government in 1980s. Since then conflicts, demonstrations, taking over of farm land, torching of homes and forced conversion have raised their ugly head. The current pro-secular administration deserves big credit for bringing back many non-Muslim Chakma tribes who were languishing in refugee camps in the hills of Tripura State of India. But the decolonization has not been carried out.
- G. **Need for New Law:** I would also like to suggest creating new laws against kidnapping and forced conversion to Islam of Hindu, Buddhist, Christian girls and wives; or at least speedy arrest and trial of perpetrators. Bangladesh Minority Watch, Kapeang Foundation, Hindu Foundation, Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, GHRD, HRCBM, Buddhist, Christian and Ahmadiya rights groups, Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee (to Eradicate Killers and Collaborators), Bangladesh (Anti-Communal Organization) Sampradayik Sampriti Parishad, local dailies like Jugantar, Ajkaler Khabor, BD News, Prathom Alo, Bhorer Kagoj, the Daily Star, New Age, Soja Sapta, Ittefaq, Amar Desh, Samakal,

Lokayan, Janakantha, and scores of others routinely print the news of abduction, property confiscation, temple destruction, desecration and more. Then there are anti-extremist civil society groups. We need to actively support these groups.

- H. **Several noted Bangladeshi** secularist Muslims have been attacked, killed, injured or exiled for promoting secularism, tolerance and human rights. Among them are poet Shamshur Rahman, writer Humayan Azad, human rights activist Shahriyar Kabir, writer Dr. Taslima Nasrin, journalist Selim Samad, writer Salam Azad, writer Ahmed Sharif, Prof. Dr. Abul Barkat, novelist Humayun Azad, poet Zia Haider and many more. We need to support their activism for the space they have created for secularists and religious minorities;
- I. **Hate Crime Law:** Almost on a daily basis I receive information from home about rape, forced conversion, murder, temple desecration or destruction, confiscation of properties, and denial of jobs. Perpetrators in these cases need to be prosecuted vigorously and victims compensated. Although at the village, school or dorm level personal intimacy of majority Muslims and minority Hindus (non-Muslims) is great. Yet Hindus complain of derogatory slurs of *malaun*, *namo* and *dhaindar bachha* we hear on a daily basis beyond their intimate circle. Buddhists and Christians are now becoming a part of that abuse.
- J. **Nandirhat, Chittagong, February 9-10, 2012 anti-Hindu Violence:** Barely a month ago another anti-Hindu organized attack took place in Bangladesh. Nine Hindu temples were torched, desecrated or damaged, with scores of Hindu homes, markets and businesses were damaged, torched or destroyed. Hindus were baffled by slow or non response by the Government. February 10, 2012 BD News reported

attacks on Hindus were preplanned by intolerant Islamist groups. In one of hopeful sign the High Court ordered the Government to compensate the Hindu victims, and arrest of criminals, the Daily Star reported on March 1, 2012. At a meeting of Hindus, Buddhists and Christians in Queens, New York City last month several Hindus indicated that their extended families were affected and others were held hostage in their own homes for over three days for fear of their lives.

K. **Enemy (Vested) Property Act:** This act is inhuman and racist which many have compared with Nazi law of confiscation of Jewish and Gypsy assets. A Hindu living for a thousand year in her homestead can become homeless overnight just by declaring her “enemies of state” by a newcomer Muslim. It is also so racist that it could not be used against the killers of Bangladeshi Presidents as they were Muslim, but was used even against the father of the idea of the Bengali nation Mr. Dharendra Nath Dutta, a Hindu, who first demanded in Pakistani Parliament that Bengali be made the national language and that love for Bengali created the nation. After Army of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan murdered him during the 1971 Liberation War his homestead was declared “enemy property” by the new secular nation. It would be like Jefferson's home being declared enemy property by the U.S. Government. The 1971 secular government retained the Enemy Property Act, renaming it Vested Property Act. According to Prof. Barkat, a Muslim, over 44% of confiscated Hindu properties were seized by the supporters of pro-secular party when they were in power and over 74% by anti-secular party when they were in power making this immense wealth transfer from the Hindus.³ This was over 65%

³ See Abul Barkat's *Impact of Vested Property Act on Rural Bangladesh: An Exploratory Study*, Prepared for Association for Land Reform and Development, Bangladesh; March 1996

of Bangladesh GDP of 2007. 90% of Hindu families are affected by this forced confiscation, without any notice and without compensation. When I interviewed Mr. Sunil Gupta, a Hindu, Minister of Land under the military ruler General Ershad in 1987 he mentioned that in the 1980s over 1.5 million acres of Hindu land, in addition to homes, ponds and businesses, was confiscated from the Hindus.⁴

L. **Decentralization:** During the military regime of General Ershad in 1980s I saw a flicker of hope with decentralization of power, and creating sort of American-, European- and Indian-style decentralized homelands with space for minorities. But once the regime came under threat they let loose anti-Hindu pogroms, and decentralization was not carried out.

M. **Exporting Intolerance and Hate from the U.S.:** We are a connected world. Promoting intolerance overseas and tolerance at home is unacceptable and won't work. I believe unless we promote tolerance and secularism overseas that intolerance will creep back home, and may pose a long-term problem for our liberal democracy. A Hindu and a Muslim who married in Bangladesh and under extraordinary pressure were able to maintain their individual religious identity. Yet in New York City the same couple was tormented by Muslims not to give their child last rites according to Hindu tradition.⁵ They raided the home and funeral parlor. Unless stopped we will soon export this type of intolerance from our shore. Our influence and our dollar reach far in poor countries.

⁴ Sachi G. Dastidar, "Bangladesh and West Bengal: Glimpses of Government Policies," *South Asia Forum Quarterly*, Editor, Dr. Mohsin Siddique; Fall; 4, 5, and 7

⁵ "Hindu Muslim Family's Choice...." *N.Y. Times*, October 4, 2008; B1

N. **On a personal note I would like** to seek your help in retrieving a centuries old statue of Lord Vishnu, a Hindu deity that belonged to my wife's Sengupta family temple in Barisal District of Bangladesh. After 1947 partition of Bengal as Muslim mobs descended on Hindu villages in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) to destroy Hindu deities and temples, it was customary to "save" the deities in family ponds. Three years back while cleaning the pond local Hindus found that statue (*murti*) and started offering prayers at a local temple. Days later police came and took it away from their temple creating uproar in the neglected, marginalized, all-poor, oppressed-caste Hindu minority. Finally they reached out to my wife and me. My family and I have written dozens of letters, talked to people, traveled to Bangladesh, met with the Head of Bangladesh Police in Dhaka and the Ambassador in Washington D.C., but the caring persons were unable to do the needful, with Lord Vishnu still sitting behind bars with no prayers being offered. Local Hindus and their Muslim allies believe it is their right to worship that they had done for hundreds of years. I am seeking your help to recover that deity.

In summary, here are a few recommendations for improving human rights and for the survival of minorities in Muslim-majority Bangladesh. This, too, I believe, is applicable to other states in the region. I believe your Commission can help a lot to achieve that goal:

1. We should promote secularism, democracy and tolerance for all states in the region;
2. Democratic elections in Bangladesh be held in timely manner with observers from Bangladesh Civil Society, overseas, and Bengali-speaking expatriates;
3. The Secular Constitution should be brought back as promised in pre-election manifesto and demanded by the entire spectrum of civil society, and minority groups;

4. Support the trial of killers during independence struggle that is taking place now at the International Criminal Court in Bangladesh. This is extremely important.
5. Urge our U.S. government, international human rights groups, International Criminal Court, U.N. Human Rights Commission and other human rights bodies to actively support the trial. Just because Hindus are not organized or secularists have no influence does not mean our lives are expandable;
6. Trial of 1971 killers belonging to Pakistani Military and Administration should immediately be started. (Across the border in West Bengal Chief Minister Banerjee has initiated several tribunals to look into atrocities committed by the ruling Communists.) Those 1971 mass murderers are now destabilizing Pakistan.
7. A separate tribunal be established to look into attempts of extermination of Hindus. (Use of that word was questioned. See Pakistan's Hamoodur Commission Report)⁶;
8. By all means funds flowing from our anti-democratic, anti-women, anti-infidel, anti-tolerance, anti-secular, anti-human rights allies in the Middle-East be stopped;
9. By all means extremists supported by our anti-democratic, anti-women, anti-infidel, anti-tolerance, anti-secular, anti-human rights allies in the Middle-East be stopped;
10. All the Hindu temples of the February 2012 anti-Hindu pogrom of Nandirhat, Chittagong be restored immediately by public funds and reparation paid by anti-Hindu terrorists;
11. All the Hindu homes and businesses torched, destroyed and damaged during that Nandirhat pogrom be fully compensated and reparation paid;
12. All the arsonists and criminals involved in that 2012 Nanddirhart pogrom be arrested and punished according to law;

⁶ *Empire's Last Casualty: Indian Subcontinent's Vanishing Hindu and Other Minorities*, Firma KLM Publishers, Kolkata (Calcutta), 2008; 291-295

13. Forced conversion of girls and women be considered as a special hate crime;
14. A protocol of protecting minorities before the upcoming election must be developed now;
15. Hindus, other minorities and secular Muslims who are victims of terror must be allowed to return home;
16. Create mechanisms to prevent export of intolerance and fundamentalism from our shore;
17. Perpetrators of 2001 pre- and post-election anti-Hindu violence, including gang rape, must be brought to justice. (One of our foundations provided shelters to many victims, the youngest being 8 years old.) I thank the current government as they have promised to prosecute the rapists and anti-Hindu terrorists;
18. Hindu and other minorities must fully be integrated in police, army, diplomacy, air force, border security, judiciary and administration. This will guarantee their human rights;
19. All Hindu properties confiscated through Enemy (Vested) Property Act must be returned, reparation paid and confiscators prosecuted. If Hindus were forced to leave the country, they should be invited to return back. Government should act immediately as promised.
20. In Constitution equal rights for all religions must be re-enshrined, as before;
21. Autonomy of Chittagong Hill Tracts be established like Indian Kashmir or Christian-majority Mizoram or Nagaland states of India;
22. Schooling in tribal languages be vigorously pursued;
23. We need to actively support tolerant secular groups and individuals;
24. Decentralization of administrative power should be encouraged, first with the Chittagong Hills, then elsewhere creating a space for minorities where they are a majority;
25. Help us to bring back the statue of Lord Vishnu to our Barisal village.

Question we must ask Can the State guarantee human rights to Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Ahamadiya, and tribal minority? I believe it can as Hindu and other minorities are not engaged in violent anti-state, or anti-majority-Muslim violence.

Let me take this opportunity to thank Congressman Wolf for sponsoring a bill for a Special Envoy to Defend Religious Minorities in Muslim-majority areas, U. S. State Department, U.S C.I.R.F., Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, House Committee on Foreign Affairs who helped ushering in a fair election in 2008. Let me also thank Congressman Dold who spoke on the House floor citing my work, and Congressman Crowley for bringing justice to my Hindu friend whose adult son was beheaded because they hadn't given away their property free of charge and move to India.

I know thousands of individuals like their minority Hindus and others to have full rights in their homeland, but are unable to counter the intolerant anti-Hindu, anti-secular forces. I believe these suggestions will promote human rights create a progressive nation, which will be a symbol among Muslim-majority and developing nations.

With that let me end here. I will be happy to answer questions.

Thanks.

Sachi G. Dastidar