

**Remarks for Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Briefing on Human Rights in Bangladesh
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Thank you all for coming today to this Congressional briefing hosted by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, featuring speakers from the Center for Inquiry, PEN American Center, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and the Atlantic Council.

My name is Michael De Dora, and I serve as Director of Public Policy and Main Representative to the United Nations for the secular humanist advocacy organization Center for Inquiry, which has representation in Washington, D.C., as well as the United Nations in New York and Geneva. Today, I will also serve as moderator of our event.

You've already heard from Representative James McGovern, Co-Chair of the Lantos Commission, who has provided great leadership for human rights on Capitol Hill.

After my brief remarks you will hear from several speakers, who will then field questions from the audience. The purpose of today's event is to shed light on the human rights situation in Bangladesh, and help us navigate possible steps to address this situation. In particular, the panel will focus on the human rights to freedom of religion, belief, and expression — necessary components in ensuring space for civil society to operate.

My personal connection to Bangladesh tracks back to 2013, when Avijit Roy emailed me requesting that my organization help Bengali secularists fight a government crackdown on their right to freedom of expression. In particular, blogger Asif Mohiuddin had just narrowly survived an attack by Islamic extremists, and was promptly arrested for posting "derogatory comments about Islam and Prophet Muhammad."

Working in concert with allied organizations, and Avijit, the Center for Inquiry helped to secure Asif's release, as well as the release of several other bloggers detained that year. We continue to support human rights in Bangladesh through public awareness, protests, formal political advocacy, and humanitarian assistance.

Sadly, however, over the past two years the human rights situation in Bangladesh has worsened.

Most prominently, this deterioration has been marked by the five gruesome murders of secular writers and publishers *this year alone*.

In February, author Avijit Roy was hacked to death on the crowded streets of Dhaka, while leaving a book fair with his wife, Bonya Ahmed, who was seriously injured.

In the following months, writers Ananta Bijoy Das and Washiqur Rahman were both killed in similar attacks, while on their way to work.

In August, several extremists tricked their way into the home of blogger Niloy Neel, locked his wife in a room, and proceeded to kill Niloy.

And most recently, just one month ago, extremists carried out attacks on two publishing houses in Dhaka, killing publisher Faisal Deepan in his office, and seriously harming another publisher and two writers at another publishing office.

This does not include the aforementioned 2013 attack on Asif Mohiuddin, or the 2013 murder of Ahmed Haider, whose killers' trial may be the only sign of justice for slain bloggers. It also does not include the more than one dozen others have been attacked but survived, including one who we are fortunate to have with us today.

And still, these attacks are but one element of Bangladesh's broader deteriorating human rights situation, which has undermined civil and political rights. Protests against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League party have been shut down, critical views censored, and their authors arrested or sometimes disappeared. Prime Minister Hasina has stated several times that individuals do not have the right to hurt religious feelings, and for political purposes has blamed the attacks on secular activists on the opposition political party.

In addition, the minority Hindu community has suffered much harm, with many of their communities attacked, their businesses looted, and their holy sites burned.

There are also now reports that ISIS may have a foothold in Bangladesh — a claim Prime Minister Hasina refuses to take seriously.

And just this past weekend, ten Christian priests received death threats stating they would be killed one by one, and Islamic law would govern the country.

And still yet, the violent extremists who have targeted secular activists, religious groups, and foreigners remain at large.

The result: heightened sensitivity and tension, which has created a hostile environment for civil society operations, and in turn, fostered self-censorship.

This situation harms *all Bangladeshis*. For every handful of individuals who carry out an attack, there are thousands more who oppose them, as demonstrated by recent protests, and who worry about the future of their country. These individuals, of all religious and non-religious backgrounds, envision a pluralistic and democratic Bangladesh. And they wonder where their government is as this vision — and those who hold it — is being hacked to death.

But, truth be told, the rise of extremism *harms us all*. If the human rights situation in Bangladesh worsens — if terror groups such as Ansarullah Bangla Team and al Qaeda and ISIS are allowed to roam more freely in, and take more control over the country — the global community will soon have a much bigger problem on our hands than a series of gruesome attacks in Bangladesh.

So, then, what is to be done?

While Bangladesh has not been on the forefront of issues addressed by Congress, Congress has not completely ignored this issue.

For instance, in 2013 the House Committee on Foreign Affairs held a hearing titled “Bangladesh in Turmoil: A Nation on the Brink?” More recently, the House Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific held a hearing on worsening political and religious extremism in Bangladesh.

These hearings have helped to raise awareness on the Hill in regards to the human rights situation in Bangladesh, which has helped to engender political will to address the situation.

In part by consequence of this growing political will, earlier this year Representative Tulsi Gabbard introduced House Resolution 396, which calls on the Bangladesh government to protect the human rights of all its citizens, particularly vulnerable minorities, strengthen democratic institutions and rule of law, and prevent the growth of extremist groups.

While certain parts of this resolution are debated, it does mark a significant step forward in Congressional efforts addressing the human rights situation in Bangladesh.

And, it should be noted that the State Department, in particularly through its Office of International Religious Freedom, has been engaged on this issue.

But, of course, more can be done. Fortunately for us — we have a spectacular panel of speakers who are going to draw on their personal experiences and expertise to provide insight on the human rights situation in Bangladesh and share their ideas about what the U.S. government — *and in particular Congress* — can do to ensure Bangladesh

addresses these troubling trends in a manner consistent with its obligations to respect and protect human rights.

Our speakers, in the order in which they will present, are:

- Bonya Ahmed, a humanist activist, published science author, and moderator of the blog *Mukto-Mona*, a hub for Bengali-speaking freethinkers and rationalists.
- Karin Karlekar, Director of Free Expression Programs at PEN American Center;
- Sahar Chaudhry, Senior Policy Analyst, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom;
- Bharath Gopaldaswamy, Director, South Asia Center, Atlantic Council.

Thank you again for coming.