



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing
Briefing Series on the Shrinking Space for Civil Society

Human Rights in Bangladesh

Tuesday, December 1, 2015
10:00 AM – 11:00 AM
2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks

Good morning. On behalf of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, I would like to welcome you to our briefing this morning on human rights in Bangladesh, as part of our series on the shrinking space for civil society. I extend a special welcome to our distinguished panelists, including Ms. Rafida Bonya Ahmed who continues to advocate for freedom of expression and human dignity, despite the tragedy that has befallen her. Thank you all for taking the time to be with us today, and for the outstanding work you do on behalf of human rights. I also thank the Commission staff for organizing the briefing.

In the years since Bangladesh gained its independence from Pakistan in 1971, after a war in which some 1 million people died, political turmoil has persisted. In the power struggle between the major political parties—the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party—civil society often gets caught in the crossfire.

Earlier this year in February, Ms. Ahmed, who joins us today, and her husband Avijit Roy were ambushed in Dhaka by machete-wielding extremists, who targeted the couple for their activism and writings on secular views. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. Three other secular bloggers as well as a publisher have been killed since then. The justice system has been slow to respond: it wasn't until September of this year that the first charges were brought against suspects in connection with any of these killings. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Sheikh

Hasina has stated that individuals do not have the “right to speak in a way that hurts religious sentiment.”

In other cases, the hammer comes swiftly. Just a few days ago, two opposition leaders were executed. They had been convicted of atrocities by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), a war crimes mechanism established to hold perpetrators accountable for serious human rights violations during the 1971 liberation war. The objectives of the ICT, to deliver justice and provide closure to the victims, are sound. But credible observers—including the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International—have criticized the trials as lacking fair trial and due process standards. As Co-Chairs of the Commission, Congressman Pitts and I joined many others, including former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Stephen Rapp, in calling on Bangladesh to halt the executions because of the due process issues. Unfortunately, our calls were not heeded.

Additional concerns have been raised by the government’s response to protests and dissent. Opposition rallies have been restricted or broken up by state security forces, leading to mass arrests as well as deaths, while human rights defenders that document abuses have been threatened or detained and often assaulted themselves. There have been reports of extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances. With the news that transnational terror networks—including Al Qaeda and ISIS—are present in Bangladesh, the challenges to stability and democracy are likely to intensify.

I recognize the tension that exists between balancing national security with individuals’ human rights, as we face similar questions in our country. But human rights, particularly the rights to expression, assembly, and association, are critical ingredients for a successful democracy, and democracy seems to be the best option we have for managing diversity. Whether you espouse strong religious views, or argue for secularism, or whether you are a lawyer documenting human rights violations, or a defendant charged for committing them, all individuals are entitled to the full range of human rights protections, including due process and equal protection. As a member of the international community and State Party to human rights treaties, Bangladesh has an obligation to protect everyone’s rights not only when convenient, but under all circumstances.

I look forward to hearing our panelists’ recommendations as to how the U.S., and specifically Congress, can best engage the Bangladeshi government to secure human rights for all its people. In this regard, I would like to mention H. Res. 290 which calls for the global repeal of blasphemy laws. This resolution was introduced by my colleague Mr. Pitts, and I am a co-sponsor, but we need a lot more support.