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**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing:
Elections and Human Rights in Bangladesh**

Statement on Behalf of World Vision US

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Preventing and Ending Violence Against Children in Bangladesh

Good afternoon. I'd like to begin by thanking Congressman Jim McGovern, Congressman Randy Hultgren, and members of the commission, for your efforts to strengthen U.S. leadership on human rights issues globally, including the issue of Bangladesh election violence. I also want to thank you for the invitation to speak more broadly on behalf of vulnerable children in the country of Bangladesh.

My name is Laura Bramon and I am a Senior Program Manager for Child Protection and Education at World Vision. World Vision is a global Christian relief, development, and advocacy organization dedicated to working with children, families and communities. We work in over 100 countries around the world to address the root causes of poverty and injustice. As a Christian organization, we believe that every child is created in the image of God and deserves to experience life in all its fullness.

THE CONTEXT

Some of World Vision's earliest work in the country of Bangladesh served survivors of political violence during the country's Liberation War of 1971. Several of my Bangladeshi colleagues were children during the conflict. They recall the hunger, fear, and politically-motivated violence they experienced as their families fled through the flooded mangrove forests of the Sundarban, seeking sanctuary in refugee camps.

Recently, a considerable focus of our programming in Bangladesh has been serving refugees from Myanmar that have fled to Bangladesh because of extreme violence in the northern Rakhine state. We are deeply concerned about the ongoing threat to repatriate these refugees against their will. The involuntary return of refugees to Myanmar, where their lives and safety remain at grave risk, is a violation of fundamental refugee protection principles.

In December, Bangladesh will hold its general elections. From our experience working in both humanitarian and development contexts across the country, we know that political violence—including election violence—remains a grave, cyclical danger for Bangladeshi children. In election seasons and on anniversaries of controversial political events, politically-motivated sexual violence, firebombing,¹ and mob-led road blockades² often claim children among their victims.³ During protests, public speeches, or marches, political pressure groups may coerce children living on the streets into attacking rival pressure

¹ <https://www.ucanews.com/news/four-killed-in-deadly-political-violence-in-bangladesh/72782>

² <https://www.dhakatribune.com/uncategorized/2013/12/06/children-used-in-political-violence>

³ <https://www.ucanews.com/news/four-killed-in-deadly-political-violence-in-bangladesh/72782>

groups. These senseless acts of violence are heartbreaking. Sadly, they are part of a broader culture of violence that Bangladeshi children face every day, a culture that does not shift significantly when national-level power volleys to a different political party.

Since 2012, I have worked alongside my Bangladeshi colleagues to manage child sex trafficking and child labor projects in the country's southwestern Khulna Region. The famous Grand Trunk Road—a kind of southern cousin to the Silk Road—cuts through Khulna as it winds from the Bay of Bengal to Kabul. This ancient commercial artery feeds a precarious local economy of machine shops, rice paddies, shrimp farms, jute producers, and brick factories, some of which—especially, in our observation, the shrimp industry—support international supply chains catering to US and European consumers. Poverty, family breakdown, and harmful cultural norms regarding violence and the dignity of women reduce many people—both children and their parents—to a kind of contractual state. People are worth only what they can earn.

The International Labor Organization estimates that 1.2 million Bangladeshi children are exploited in the worst forms of child labor. In Khulna, child labor is often seen as a kind of apprenticeship for the poor, an on-ramp to a normative life of grueling day labor. Among the children in our child labor project, it is not unusual for boys and girls to enter the workforce around the age of eight or nine. Frequently engaged in hazardous, forced, or bonded labor, they apply their wages immediately to the family's rent, food, and health care costs—or to the bare necessities that keep orphaned and abandoned children alive on the streets. They have no recourse when their bosses beat or sexually exploit them.

Girls face the dangers not only of child labor, but also of child marriage—an issue that sits at the nexus of poverty, limited access to quality education, and gender inequality. While a girl's job at a shrimp factory may bring in less than a dollar a day, an early marriage wins her parents full financial reprieve by transferring her to her husband's family—or, in some very sad cases, to a sex trafficker posing as a groom. Bangladeshi law stipulates that girls may not marry until they are 18 years old, but the country currently holds the world's fourth highest child marriage rate,⁴ with nearly 60 percent of girls married before the age of 18.⁵ Notably, global statistics show that girls married before the age of 18 experience higher rates of domestic violence in adulthood.⁶ And around the world, early pregnancy due in part to child marriage is one of the leading causes of death to girls age 15-19.⁷

ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN BANGLADESH

In Bangladesh, our staff work in some of the country's most impoverished urban, peri-urban, and rural communities, helping families, faith leaders, and government leaders protect children. Our grassroots work is amplified by national-level advocacy work with the Government of Bangladesh and international and local non-governmental actors, as we lead a national advocacy campaign to stop physical violence against children—in homes, schools, and workplaces. Our advocacy work is conducted in concert with “It Takes A World To End Violence Against Children”, World Vision's global advocacy campaign that

⁴ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/bangladesh/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Heise, L., J. Pitanguy and A. Germain (1994). Violence Against Women: The Hidden Health Burden. Discussion Paper #255. The World Bank: Washington, D.C.

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/489381468740165817/Violence-against-women-the-hidden-health-burden>

⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC411126/>

brings together presidents, parents, civil society, artists and faith leaders across 65 countries to call for an end to violence against children.

At the grassroots level, both child labor and child marriage require robust and multi-sectoral interventions, engaging the child, the family, the community, and their faith leaders, as well as Government actors who bear responsibility for responding to child protection incidents.

World Vision's privately-funded child labor project in Bangladesh, a four-year, multi-million dollar initiative, has supported the withdrawal of nearly 300 children from child labor, helped children start or re-enter formal education, and improved families' income generation opportunities. Children receive catch-up education, scholarships for primary, secondary, or vocational schools, and academic coaching to help them succeed in their studies. Parents receive a conditional cash transfer to offset wages lost when children stop working, and they engage in parenting education classes to help them understand the benefits of allowing their children to study, play, and defer work or marriage. At the same time, we work closely with the Bangladeshi Government to strengthen its existing child labor monitoring and response mechanisms, including the Divisional Child Welfare Council, District Child Labor Monitoring Committee, District Child Rights Monitoring Forum, and Upazila Child Rights Monitoring Committees.

The story of the Matubbar family—Mother Bilkis, sons Babu and Sabbir, and daughter Sumaiya—is one of my favorites because it shows how readily and vigorously families respond when offered a chance to change their circumstances. Abandoned by her husband, Bilkis did her best to care for her children, but it wasn't possible for her to give them the life she dreamed of. Only Babu, her eldest son, briefly attended school. When World Vision met Babu (13) and Sabbir (9), two years ago at a local river port, they were among a tribe of young boys ferrying suitcases and crates from the bus terminal to the boats. Their sister Sumaiya (11), worked as a trash picker, while Bilkis sold boiled eggs by the roadside. Together, their earnings barely kept them from starving. Now, two years into the project, Babu, Sabbir, and Sumaiya are all going to school, equipped with uniforms and text books, papers, and pencils. Bilkis opted to start a neighborhood grocery stall, and with World Vision's help, established a thriving business. Now, her monthly income of \$175 dollars⁸ covers all of her family's expenses—from rent to nutritious food to school fees.

Child marriage touches on even more sensitive cultural and religious elements of Bangladeshi society, and it too requires a robust response. Since 2015, World Vision, together with the World Food Program (WFP), Winrock International, and three local partner NGOs, has implemented a five-year USAID Food for Peace Title II Development Food Assistance Project called Nobo Jatra, or New Beginning. Nobo Jatra works to improve gender equitable food security, nutrition and resilience in southwest Bangladesh. It embeds child marriage work within a holistic suite of community-based interventions, including investments in agriculture, water and sanitation, and alternative livelihoods.

Nobo Jatra implements much of its child marriage work through a male engagement model that champions the role of husbands and fathers in reducing family violence and building family stability. Facilitated small-group discussions encourage over 4,000 men to ask tough questions about masculinity, human dignity, and the practicalities of marriage and family life, including physical violence and shared responsibilities in parenting and financial management. A key component of work is linking fathers with "Bride Not Before 18", our Bangladesh public awareness campaign on child marriage. Fathers learn about the value of seeing their daughters not just as economic assets but as unique, infinitely valuable

⁸ \$175 US dollars equals about 14,663 Bangladeshi taka.

young women; they are encouraged to support their daughters' education and wait until their daughters are at least 18 to consider a consensual marriage with a young man who will respect her and value her, just as her father does. At the same time, nearly 50 local Child Protection Committees hold fathers and community leaders accountable for adhering to child marriage laws, and stand ready to provide immediate help to children and youth at risk of or trapped in child marriage. Combined efforts have culminated in the committees enforcing child marriage laws and policies to prevent 162 cases of child marriage till date.

The hope is that fathers who participate in male engagement initiatives will follow the lead of Gopal Mondol, a day laborer in rural southwestern Bangladesh. Gopal and his wife Modhumita are the parents of three daughters, two of whom suffered the hardships of child marriage. Their youngest daughter, Dolly, was set to marry at age 15. Sobered and scared by her older sisters' experiences, Dolly did not know there a way out until a Nobo Jatra community education session taught her about Bangladeshi child marriage laws. Gopal agreed to meet with a group of local men who respectfully persuaded him to abide by the law, delay Dolly's marriage, and allow her to finish her education. Dolly is now, very happily, on-track to be the first of her father's daughters to spend her teenage years in school. She is currently a Class 8 student—roughly equivalent to a US junior high level—and looking forward to entering high school.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We have seen great progress resulting from our work with vulnerable children in Bangladesh, but there is still work to be done. Globally, more than one billion children are exposed to violence every year. The consequences of violence against children to public health, economic growth, and the achievement of future development goals are vast. Violence in childhood can impair brain development or lead to mental health problems, poor school performance, and increased rates of dropout, pregnancy, HIV and other communicable and noncommunicable diseases.

The U.S. plays a crucial role in leading the effort to end violence against children. Representatives McGovern and Poe and Senators Boozman and Cardin have championed House Resolution 910 and Senate Resolution 606 to condemn violence against children and youth and encourage the development of a strategy for preventing, addressing, and ending violence globally. To most effectively accomplish this goal, the U.S. should continue to provide high-level leadership and coordination around these efforts. A whole-of-government approach is essential to future achievements in protecting children from violence.

Across Bangladesh, child protection interventions are key to reducing violence and promoting resiliency. This is especially true in the south near the border with Myanmar, where thousands of Rohingya have fled for safety and protection. Despite the overwhelming need to protect children during emergencies—a time when they are uniquely vulnerable to sexual violence, physical violence, and human trafficking—child protection in humanitarian emergencies is often globally deprioritized or underfunded. To see the protection of children become a top priority for the international community, there must be stronger diplomatic and financial attention.

Thus, we ask the US Government to pursue the following policy recommendations:

- 1.) Commission a study on the actual and potential lifesaving impact of child protection programming, generally, and during humanitarian emergency responses, specifically. We encourage the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance to play an increasing leadership role in protecting children during humanitarian crises by categorizing Child Protection as a "lifesaving" intervention. This would enable

funds for child protection to be released more quickly by the U.S. government, and it would both acknowledge and mitigate the dire consequences of violence against children in humanitarian settings.

- 2.) Robustly support the Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB) at the U.S. Department of Labor at \$91.125 million in FY2020. A key partner in addressing violence against children, ILAB has worked holistically^[1] for over 20 years to reduce hazardous child labor. Through its programmatic partnerships with communities and governments, ILAB increases access to education for children and supports livelihood opportunities for families. As such, ILAB has been a leading contributor to the global effort that has cut hazardous child labor in half since 2000. Additionally, ILAB' research on goods produced by child labor or forced labor is one of the most watched and respected child labor reports in the world, and we ask that ILAB be supported to robustly research child labor in Bangladesh—particularly, child labor in Khulna region shrimp and fishing industries.

Thank you, Congressman Hultgren and Congressman McGovern, for your commitment to the rights of children globally. World Vision looks forward to further working with the members of the commission to address these critical concerns for children.

^[1] ILAB works across multiple sectors including education, livelihoods, child protection, and others to address the root causes of this harmful practice for sustainable and lasting change.