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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Statement on Behalf of World Vision US

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Human Rights Concerns and Effective Child Protection Strategies in Bangladesh

Good afternoon. I'd like to begin by thanking Congressman McGovern, Congressman Hultgren, and members of the commission, for your efforts to strengthen U.S. leadership on human rights 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 Bangladesh.

My name is Laura Bramon and I'm 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 in over 100 countries.

THE CONTEXT

Some of World Vision's earliest work in Bangladesh served survivors of political violence during the country's Liberation War of 1972. Several of my colleagues were children during the conflict. They recall the hunger, fear, and politically-motivated violence they experienced as their families fled to refugee camps.

Over the past year, a considerable focus of our programming in the region has been with refugees from Myanmar that have fled to Bangladesh because of extreme violence in northern Rakhine state. We are deeply concerned about the plan of the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh to repatriate these refugees today. 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. Political violence remains a grave, cyclical danger for Bangladeshi children. In election seasons and on anniversaries of controversial political events, sexual violence and firebombing¹ often claim children among their victims.² Sadly, this is part of a broader culture of violence that children face every day.

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, where poverty, family breakdown and harmful cultural norms reduce people to a state in which they are only worth what they can earn.

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

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An estimated 1.2 million Bangladeshi children are exploited in the worst forms of child labor.³ It is not unusual for boys and girls to enter the workforce around the age of 8 or 9. Frequently engaged in hazardous, forced, or bonded labor, they apply their wages immediately to the bare necessities that keep them alive.

Girls face the additional danger of child marriage. While a girl's job at a shrimp factory may bring in less than a dollar a day, a 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

ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN BANGLADESH

In Bangladesh, our staff work in some of the country's most impoverished communities. Our work with children, families, the government, and faith leaders is amplified by national-level advocacy work to stop physical violence against children—in homes, schools, and workplaces.

World Vision's privately-funded multi-million-dollar child labor project in Bangladesh has supported the withdrawal of nearly 300 children from child labor. The project prepares them to start or re-enter formal education and improves their families' income generation opportunities. We also work closely with the Bangladeshi Government to strengthen its existing monitoring and response mechanisms.

When I met the Mattubar family two years ago in Khulna, Babu (13) and Sabbir (9), were among a tribe of young boys ferrying crates at a local river port. Their sister Sumaiya (11), worked as a trash picker, while their mother Bilkis sold boiled eggs. Sadly, their father had abandoned them. Now, Babu, Sabbir, and Sumaiya are all in school. Bilkis has started a neighborhood grocery business that I visited a year ago this month, and she is proud to report that her income covers all of her family's expenses.

Child marriage touches on even more sensitive cultural and religious elements issues, and it too requires a robust response. Since 2015, World Vision, together with the World Food Program (WFP) and other partners, has implemented a USAID Food for Peace project called Nobo Jatra, or New Beginning.

Nobo Jatra implements its child marriage work through a male engagement module that champions the role of husbands and fathers in reducing family violence. Fathers are encouraged to support their daughters' education and wait until they are at least 18 to consider a consensual marriage. Child Protection Committees hold fathers accountable and stand ready to help at-risk girls. Combined efforts have resulted in the prevention of 162 cases of child marriage.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We have seen great progress in Bangladesh, but there is still work to be done and the U.S. plays a crucial role in leading this work. House Resolution 910 and Senate Resolution 606 condemn violence against children and encourage the development of a strategy to end violence globally. The U.S. should continue these efforts to provide leadership and coordination around ending violence against children.

³ ILO

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

Across Bangladesh, child protection interventions are key to reducing violence and promoting resiliency. This is especially true near the border with Myanmar, where thousands of Rohingya have fled. Unfortunately, child protection in emergencies is often globally deprioritized or underfunded.

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

First: We encourage the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance to play an increasing leadership role 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 mitigate the dire consequences of violence against children in humanitarian settings.

Second: Robustly support⁵ the Department of Labor’s Bureau of International Labor Affairs. ILAB has contributed to the global effort that cut hazardous child labor in half since the year 2000 and is a key partner in ending violence against children globally.

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

⁵ The exact ask is \$91.125 million- the same as FY14