

**Universal Periodic Review of Bangladesh 44th session, November 2023**

Stakeholder submission from the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches

*Discrimination against minorities in Bangladesh*

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*Background*

The information contained in this report has been provided by partners of the World Council of Churches, including churches and from representatives of other faiths.

*Ethnic and religious minorities*

Bangladesh comprises a diverse mixture of ethnic and religious communities, however the majority of the people are Bengali and are Muslim.

Other ethnic groups include Biharis, who are Muslim ethnic Urdu-speakers, and are the descendents of Muslims displaced from Bihar state in India. Another important ethnic group are Rohingas, who are refugees from Myanmar, and also Muslim. Estimates suggest that approximately 950,000 Rohingya refugees are living in Bangladesh in 34 extremely congested camps.

Religious minorities include Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Animists.

### *Discrimination and violence against minorities*

There is a long history of discrimination and violence against minorities in Bangladesh, stemming from the partition of India into East and West Pakistan, which then became Bangladesh and Pakistan.

In the last UPR of Bangladesh in 2018, several recommendations addressed the concerns about minority communities in Bangladesh.

Recommendations 147.155 (South Africa) and 157 (France) called for the *implementation and guarantee of legal, policy, and administrative measures for the protection of the rights of persons belonging to minorities*.

Concerning religious minorities specifically, recommendation 147.156 (Austria) called for the *effective investigation and sanctioning of all cases of violence*, 148.4 (Estonia) called for ensuring *legal and constitutional protection and facilitated reporting of violations of their rights*. 147.63 (United Kingdom) recommended that the Bangladesh work with civil society to develop a road map to implement Human Rights Council resolution 16/18 on *combating religious intolerance*, and 147.64 (Holy See) called for continued work to *enhance religious freedom and the prevention of violent extremism*, which was also addressed in recommendation 147.139 (Haiti). 147.74 (Poland) recommended efforts to *protect freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief for all citizens and residents, and to support civil society participation*

Three recommendations addressed the *protection from violence and empowerment of women and girls* (147.139 – Haiti, 148.19 – Uruguay, and 149.24 – Finland)

### *Implementation of previous UPR recommendations*

According to the Legal Aid and Human Rights Organisation Ain-O-Salish Kendra<sup>1</sup>, at least 3679 attacks took place against minority communities in Bangladesh between 2013 and 2020.

In 2020, sporadic attacks against minorities were reported across the country in which 71 people were injured, 11 houses destroyed and hundreds of houses belonging to the minority community were looted. On March 17, 2021 three villages belonging to Hindu minorities in Shalla, Sunamganj were attacked. Hundreds of houses were looted and three temples in the locality were destroyed. Further attacks against Hindu communities took place across Bangladesh in October 2021, provoked by rumors that Hindus had desecrated the Quran. These attacks followed a similar pattern to others which have been perpetrated against religious minorities in recent years; online posts promulgate false allegations, rumours then begin with a local community that people from a minority background have defamed Islam, and orchestrated “fake news” quickly spreads to incite violence against minorities.

According to information provided by the Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities (HRCBM), which did an investigation across 46 districts of 64 districts, the following acts of violence

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.askbd.org/ask/category/publications-and-resources/human-rights-reports>

took place. At least 600 women and girls were sexually assaulted in a single town of Hajiganj, 15 Hindu men were hacked to death, 5 Hindu women and girls were gang-raped, hundreds of houses, businesses and temples belonging to the Hindu community were destroyed and looted. There are reports of people being arbitrarily detained on the pretext of having committed blasphemy, with the intention of instilling fear in affected communities and forcing them to refrain from sharing news of atrocities.

Following the attacks, a writ was filed at the High Court of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh seeking judicial enquiry into the mass attacks of October 2021 against the country's minorities. The Government of Bangladesh requested the postponement of judiciary enquiry, and to date, more than 20000 cases of attacks against minorities in Bangladesh are pending. The Government continues to deny the occurrence of such atrocities against minorities in the country, and the continuing failure to carry out proper investigations into incidents of violence has created an environment of impunity.

Information from the HRCBM on atrocities on minorities, details attacks on religious minorities in Bangladesh, with 319 families affected by the violence and over 173 temples vandalised during the course of the year. The Bangladesh National Hindu Grand Alliance reported that a total of 154 religious minorities, including Hindus, were killed in the country between January and December 2022.

### *The Chittagong Hill Tracts*

Recommendations 147.9-147.12 from Australia, Denmark, Maldives and New Zealand called for measures to implement the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord which was signed in 1997 between the Government of Bangladesh and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts). The Peace Accord had been aimed at recognising the rights of peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region and ending the decades long conflict.

In 2020, sporadic attacks against minorities took place across the Chittagong Hill Tracts, including the destruction of a reported 34 homes, and the looting of 259 other houses. These attacks displaced 2000 indigenous families who went to the Indian state of Tripura. Attacks such as this continued in 2021 and 2022.

### *Discrimination against Biharis*

Biharis are the descendents of non-Bengali, Urdu-speaking people who came to what was then East Pakistan mostly from the Indian states of Bihar and West Bengal after the Partition of India in 1947. Many Biharis had supported Pakistan's failed attempts to resist the creation of independent Bangladesh in 1971, but only a small percentage were allowed to settle in Pakistan. Most of the remaining Bihari and their descendents have lived in slum-like camps around Bangladesh since 1971.

In 2008, Bangladesh's Supreme Court recognized Biharis' right to citizenship in Bangladesh, however they face discrimination in many areas of their lives. The living conditions in the camps are poor, they have not been given housing outside of the camps, despite the promises of the Government to

provide this. They have limited access to health care and education, and face discrimination with respect to employment.

The generation of Biharis who have been born since 1971 consider themselves to be fully Bangladeshi, but describe being treated like aliens and suffering from insecurity about their future.

### *Discrimination against the Rohingya*

Cox's Bazar now hosts more than 950,000 Rohingya across 34 camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf upazilas (administrative regions) and Bhasan Char Island in Hatiya upazila.<sup>2</sup> Bangladesh is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the Rohingya are registered as 'forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals' rather than as refugees. In 1982, Myanmar passed a citizenship law that denied the Rohingya people citizenship. Though Myanmar recognizes 135 distinct ethnic groups, the Rohingya are not one of them. Rohingya people are considered stateless. They face restrictions on movement, they are not legally permitted to work, and lack most basic rights, including access to health care, adequate food and shelter, and education.

### *Recommendations*

The recommendations made addressing the concerns about minority communities in Bangladesh in the last UPR of Bangladesh in 2018, have not been implemented and remain valid

In particular:

Legal, policy and administrative measures for the protection of the human rights of persons belonging to minorities must be strengthened and implemented.

Police and members of the judiciary must be adequately trained to respond appropriately to threats and attacks against minorities. Where online posts incite violence, these must be rapidly counteracted to de-escalate such situations and encourage dialogue and peace building measures.

Members of minority groups and all who have experienced violence and discrimination must be given adequate protection and support to report the violations of their rights

There must be effective investigation and sanctioning of all cases of violence and discrimination, and measures must be taken to prevent violent extremism.

Particular measures must be taken to ensure the empowerment of women and girls, and their protection from violence and discrimination

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.acaps.org/country/bangladesh/crisis/rohingya-refugees>

