

## Refugee Review Tribunal

### AUSTRALIA

#### RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

**Research Response Number:** BGD30821  
**Country:** Bangladesh  
**Date:** 8 November 2006

Keywords: Bangladesh – Hindus – Awami League – Bengali language

This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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#### Questions

1. Are Hindus a minority religion in Bangladesh?
2. How are religious minorities, notably Hindus, treated in Bangladesh?
3. Is the Awami League traditionally supported by the Hindus in Bangladesh?
4. Are Hindu supporters of the Awami League discriminated against and if so, by whom?
5. Are there parts of Bangladesh where Hindus enjoy more safety?
6. Is Bengali the language of Bangladeshis?

#### RESPONSE

##### 1. Are Hindus a minority religion in Bangladesh?

Hindus constitute approximately 10 percent of the population in Bangladesh making them a religious minority. Sunni Muslims constitute around 88 percent of the population and Buddhists and Christians make up the remainder of the religious minorities. The Hindu minority in Bangladesh has progressively diminished since partition in 1947 from approximately 25 percent of the population to its current 10 percent (US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2006 – Bangladesh*, 15 September – Attachment 1).

##### 2. How are religious minorities, notably Hindus, treated in Bangladesh?

In general, minorities in Bangladesh have been consistently mistreated by the government and Islamist extremists. Specific discrimination against the Hindu minority intensified immediately following the 2001 national elections when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) gained victory with its four-party coalition government, including two Islamic parties. According to several sources, attacks against Hindus continue to occur. While sources confirm that the BNP-led government has made an effort to protect the Hindu minority in some instances, for instance during particular festivals, Hindus remain at risk of attacks in

Bangladesh. The continued harassment included murders, rape, torture, destruction of homes, forced evictions and desecration of Hindu temples.

In its 2006 religious freedom report on Bangladesh, the US Department of State provides the following assessment of attacks against the Hindu minority:

Attacks against the Hindu community at the hand of societal actors continued. An NGO reported that during the period from December 1, 2004 to November 2005, there were 52 killings, 78 attacks on Hindu temples, 29 kidnappings, and 161 incidents of assault, theft, looting, or intimidation.

...[t]here were unconfirmed reports that in September 2005, twelve indigenous Hindu cobblers from the Chandpur Village were evicted. Reportedly, a Kwami madrassah was built on the land.

According to one NGO, on October 15, 2005, the “Ma Kali Mandir” Temple in Patuakhali was forcefully occupied, and its Hindu priest was physically assaulted. Reportedly, the temple then was turned into a madrassah.

On October 15, 2005, approximately 200 Hindu families were attacked and 10 houses burned down in Majhipara Village. Reportedly, ten persons were injured and the local temple was vandalized. Police were sent to the site and arrested five persons.

On October 25, 2005, Gopal Chandra Braman, a Hindu priest in the Narsingdi District was killed after being kidnapped on October 18.

According to a press report, in December 2005, two Hindus were killed and ten others were injured when a Hindu majority village in Dhubaura sub-district was attacked by a land grabber. Police intervened and arrested the perpetrator.

On December 31, 2005, a Hindu village in Brahmanbaria was attacked after an announcement was made at the village mosque. Reportedly, five homes were damaged and two men were injured as a result of the attack.

Two newspapers reported on March 16, 2006, that a group of approximately eighteen persons attacked six Hindu families and injured ten individuals in the District of Satkhira while demanding a large sum of money due to a land dispute. When the owner of the land refused to pay, the attackers physically assaulted him (US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2006 – Bangladesh*, 15 September – Attachment 1).

In a November 2006 report published by the Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR), systematic attacks against minorities, including Hindus, in Bangladesh were highlighted during 2005 and 2006:

Under the BNP-Jamaat alliance rule, intolerance and violence against the minorities increased substantially. Minority Hindus, Christians and Buddhists faced serious persecution including physical attacks, killing, abduction, threat, torture, rape, destruction of temple and grabbing of their lands.

The ruling party activists were responsible for the systematic attacks. Some of the atrocities perpetrated in 2005 include the destruction of a Hindu temple and three idols by one Rashid s/o Nurul Islam alias Kina and several of his accomplices in Lalbagh on 25 January 2005, rampaging of two Hindu temples and idols at Sandira village of Adamdighi upazila in Bogra on 17 March 2005, vandalisation of a Durga temple at Palora village in Manikganj on 15

September 2005 and attacks at three puja mandaps in Khulna, Faridpur and Jessore on 6 October 2005.

The lands of the religious minorities continued to be grabbed by the political party leaders and thugs. In February 2005, 'Siddique Bahini' men tortured and forcibly occupied the land of 14 poor Hindu families at Kapalipara village in Patuakhali. On 27 March 2005, the BNP thugs attacked Hindu families at village Chhoto Shanta in Debhata upazila, Satkhira and grabbed 42 bighas of land. At least 10 persons were injured when they tried to resist the attackers.

Similar atrocities against the Hindu minorities were also reported throughout 2006 ('Election time in Bangladesh: Minorities face risks of more rights violations' 2006, Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR), 1 November <http://www.achrweb.org/Review/2006/139-06.htm> – Accessed 2 November 2006 – Attachment 2).

A Norwegian Refugee Council Global IDP Project report, published on 21 January 2005, provides extensive information on the treatment of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh. In particular, the section titled *Displacement due to religious persecution* portrays alleged human rights abuses against the Hindu religious minority as follows:

There are frequent reports of human rights abuses against the Hindu population that sometimes lead to forced evictions and displacement. The Asia Legal Resource Centre reported in March 2003 that many continued to live in internal displacement after having been forced from their homes and that Hindus who chose to stay were forced to pay special taxes to live in their own homes (ALRC, 10 March 2003). In July 2003, a British source reported that serious attacks and persecution of religious minorities by Islamic fundamentalists was increasing and that many villages were now said to be empty of minorities (Guardian Unlimited, 21 July 2003).

More recent anecdotal information about displacement of minority groups from villages, as well as reports of continued and systematic intimidation and human rights violations, suggest that minorities continue to be displaced. During 2004, the Human Rights Committee for Bangladeshi Minorities published several reports documenting attacks, evictions and displacement of hundreds of minority families in both the Kalia and the Nowagaon districts. A common factor in the attacks has been the lack of protection of the minority population, as the local police have been reported to either be absent or making no effort to stop the violence (HRCBM, 16 July, 22 and 6 May 2004; SATP, Assessment 2003) (Norwegian Refugee Council 2005, 'Profile of Internal Displacement: Bangladesh', Global IDP Project website, 25 February, p.6 [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/C8823A1110E7DE88802570BA0054B659/\\$file/Bangladesh%20-February%202005.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/C8823A1110E7DE88802570BA0054B659/$file/Bangladesh%20-February%202005.pdf) – Accessed 6 November 2006 – Attachment 3).

The report continues to describe incidents of displacement within the Hindu community due to sectarian violence:

"Thirty persons were injured, five of them seriously, when a group of armed men, led by a local BNP leader, allegedly set afire 20 houses belonging to minority Hindus in Natore district of Bangladesh yesterday [2. January 2004]." (The Hindu, 3 January 2004)

"KALIA in the district of Norail, Bangladesh is burning from the vengeful terror attacks of 'Alliance' party cadres and their supporters. These terrorists stuck at a minimum of four small villages where minorities live. All night long on Thursday, they attacked and ravaged more than one hundred homes. They robbed the villagers of their possessions. Terrified families deserted their homes and took shelter in the forest or in other villages that so far escaped these terror attacks. [...] Fleeing mostly are the Hindu females and children who fear for their life

and dignity.” (HRCBM, 6 May 2004) (HRCBM, 16 July, 22 and 6 May 2004; SATP, Assessment 2003) (Norwegian Refugee Council 2005, ‘Profile of Internal Displacement: Bangladesh’, Global IDP Project website, 25 February, p.18 [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/C8823A1110E7DE88802570BA0054B659/\\$file/Bangladesh%20-February%202005.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/C8823A1110E7DE88802570BA0054B659/$file/Bangladesh%20-February%202005.pdf) – Accessed 6 November 2006 – Attachment 3).

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, a section of the Norwegian Refugee Council, released a report in March 2006 raising concern for the increased risk of displacement of minorities in Bangladesh. It states the following in relation to Hindus:

The BNP victory in 2001 started a massive wave of violence against the Hindu population. Their homes were looted and burned, temples desecrated and women raped (HRW, World Report 2003). Post-election violence compelled up to 200,000 Hindus to flee to safer areas or to migrate to India (USCR 2003). The intensity of the violence diminished after the first weeks following the elections, but spates of violence against Hindus have continued unabated since then. Violent assaults have been particularly frequent along the Indian border, mostly targeting Hindus but also other minorities (Griswold, 23 January 2005). Attacks against Hindus, their properties as well as their places of worship, have led to the requirement for guards to be present at temples and at religious ceremonies.

Although this has not been verified independently, two local NGOs, the Bangladesh Hindu Buddha Christian Oikya Parishad (BHBCOP) and the Human Rights Committee for Bangladeshi Minorities (HRCBM) have documented systematic intimidation and human rights violations against Hindus, suggesting that many continue to be displaced. Most of the reported incidents are directly related to land grabbing.

According to Human Rights Watch, there were persistent reports of abductions and forced conversions of minorities, and destruction and desecration of religious sites throughout 2005 as well as many reports of forced evictions of Hindus from their properties. In some cases of reported rape of Hindu girls, the police refused to pursue investigations (HRW World Report, 2005). The government has generally failed to investigate the crimes and prosecute the perpetrators (USDOS, Religious Freedom Report 2005; Daily Star, 16 September 2005).

...No information has been found regarding assistance to the Hindu, Ahmadi or Christian religious minorities, as well as indigenous communities in Northern Bangladesh, either by national authorities, or by the international community. The EU Parliament passed a strong resolution<sup>15</sup> on 14 April 2005, expressing concerns at violence against religious minorities (Norwegian Refugee Council 2006, ‘Bangladesh: minorities increasingly at risk of displacement’, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website, 28 March [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/\(httpCountrySummaries\)/514CFB22071BDA03C125713700436D1D?OpenDocument&count=10000](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpCountrySummaries)/514CFB22071BDA03C125713700436D1D?OpenDocument&count=10000) – Accessed 4 April 2006 – Attachment 4).

In an October 2006 report Amnesty International discusses the plight of minorities in Bangladesh, highlighting the role of political parties and their need to protect human rights. In relation to Hindus specifically, Amnesty states the following:

### **3.1.1 Hindus**

As stated above, following the general elections of 1 October 2001, hundreds of Hindu families were subjected to violent assaults, including rape, beatings and the burning of property. They were reportedly attacked by supporters of the BNP which won the majority of seats in Parliament, because of their perceived support for the Awami League. Hundreds of Hindu families reportedly fled to India. The police failed to take effective measures to protect

the Hindu community. Some arrests were made but most assailants were not brought to justice. So far, there has been no independent and impartial investigation into these attacks.

While the government has taken action since 2001 to protect members of the Hindu minority in the main cities, during their festivities or in times of escalated tension between Hindu and Muslim communities in neighbouring India, members of the community in Bangladesh, particularly in the rural areas, continue to be at risk of attacks (Amnesty International 2006, *Bangladesh: Briefing to Political parties for a human rights agenda*, October – Attachment 5).

### **3. Is the Awami League traditionally supported by the Hindus in Bangladesh?**

### **4. Are Hindu supporters of the Awami League discriminated against and if so, by whom?**

Several sources confirm that Hindus have traditionally supported the Awami League allegedly because of their more secular political vision. In 2001, post election violence erupted when BNP-supporters (reportedly Jamaat-i-Islami activists) systematically attacked members of the Hindu community and Awami League supporters. The Norwegian Refugee Council reports that the Hindu community was targeted "...due [to their] support for Awami League in the election..." (Norwegian Refugee Council 2005, 'Profile of Internal Displacement: Bangladesh', Global IDP Project website, 25 February, p.16

[http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/C8823A1110E7DE88802570BA0054B659/\\$file/Bangladesh%20-February%202005.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/C8823A1110E7DE88802570BA0054B659/$file/Bangladesh%20-February%202005.pdf) – Accessed 6 November 2006 – Attachment 3).

An October 2002 article by Dow Jones International News reported on the tight security surrounding the Hindu festival, Durga Puja. It states that Hindus "mostly support the opposition Awami League" ('Hindu festival in Bangladesh begins amid tight security' 2002, Dow Jones International News, 11 October – Attachment 6).

On 10 December 2001, *The Washington Times* published an article describing the influx of Awami League supporters to India, "the great majority of them Hindus who complain of murder, rape and looting at the hands of fundamentalist Muslims backing the newly elected Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia" (Rahman. S.A. 2001, 'Indian parties plead Hindu refugees' cause', *The Washington Times*, 10 December – Attachment 7).

On 24 October 2001, *The Hindu* states that "[s]upporters of the Awami League and Hindus, considered the party's vote-bank, are being subjected to persecution in Bangladesh, consequent to the elections" ('Hindu families fleeing Bangladesh' 2001, *The Hindu*, 24 October – Attachment 8).

On 22 October 2001, *The Hindu* reported that "Hindus were targeted on the charge of supporting the former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina's Awami League in the October 1 parliamentary elections" ('Hindus fleeing Bangladesh' 2001, *The Hindu*, 22 October – Attachment 9).

## 5. Are there parts of Bangladesh where Hindus enjoy more safety?

There are areas in Bangladesh considered to be “Hindu-dominated” eg. Gazipur and Chittagong. However, these were the very areas worst hit by the massive wave of violence during and after the 2001 national elections. There exists no definitive information to state that someone who is Hindu would be safer in one area or another. Many Hindus fled to India after the BNP-led coalition took power in 2001 in order to escape attacks by sections of the Muslim majority. One report by *The South Asian* states that “at least 10,000 people of the minority community from Barisal district had left their homes following attacks by activists of the fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami party and had taken shelter in neighbouring Gopalganj district, the electorate of the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Many others fled to the Indian states of Tripura and West Bengal” (‘Bangla Hindu Influx into Northeast India; Dhaka’s disclaimer and New Delhi’s tacit approval’ 2003, *The South Asian*, 23 December [http://www.thesouthasian.org/archives/2003/bangla\\_hindu\\_influx\\_into\\_north.html](http://www.thesouthasian.org/archives/2003/bangla_hindu_influx_into_north.html) – Accessed 6 November 2006 – Attachment 10).

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre highlights the significant rise in Hindus escaping to India as a result of the “increasing communalization of politics in Bangladesh”. However, the IDMC observes that this is not a first option for many Hindus in Bangladesh who simply accept internal displacement as a “way of coping with contemporary political realities” (Norwegian Refugee Council 2005, ‘Profile of Internal Displacement: Bangladesh’, Global IDP Project website, 25 February, p.15 [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/C8823A1110E7DE88802570BA0054B659/\\$file/Bangladesh%20-February%202005.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/C8823A1110E7DE88802570BA0054B659/$file/Bangladesh%20-February%202005.pdf) – Accessed 6 November 2006 – Attachment 3).

## 6. Is Bengali the language of Bangladeshis?

Bengali (otherwise known as Bangla) is the national language of Bangladesh (‘Bengali Language At Cornell’ 2006, Cornell University Department of Asian Studies website, 27 July <http://lrc.cornell.edu/asian/courses/bengali> – Accessed 6 November 2006 – Attachment 11).

For an explicit description of living languages spoken in Bangladesh, Ethnologue.com, provides a comprehensive list (‘Languages of Bangladesh’ 2005, Ethnologue.com website [http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_country.asp?name=Bangladesh](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=Bangladesh) – Accessed 6 November 2006 – Attachment 12).

## List of Sources Consulted

### Internet Sources:

#### **Government Information & Reports**

Immigration & Refugee Board of Canada <http://www.irb.gc.ca/>

US Department of State <http://www.state.gov/>

#### **Non-Government Organisations**

Norwegian Refugee Council/Global IDP Project <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

International Crisis Group <http://www.crisisgroup.org/>

Minorities at Risk <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/>

US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants <http://www.refugees.org/>

Refugees International <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/>

### **International News & Politics**

BBC News <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

Time Asia <http://www.time.com/>

New Age <http://www.newagebd.com/>

Weekly Holiday <http://www.weeklyholiday.net/>

The Daily Star <http://www.thedailystar.net/>

### **Topic Specific Links**

Ethnologue – Languages of the World <http://www.ethnologue.com/>

### **Search Engines**

Google search engine <http://www.google.com.au/>

### Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIMA Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

### **List of Attachments**

1. US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2006 – Bangladesh*, 15 September.
2. ‘Election time in Bangladesh: Minorities face risks of more rights violations’ 2006, Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR), 1 November  
<http://www.achrweb.org/Review/2006/139-06.htm> – Accessed 2 November 2006.
3. Norwegian Refugee Council 2005, ‘Profile of Internal Displacement: Bangladesh’, Global IDP Project website, 25 February [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/C8823A1110E7DE88802570BA0054B659/\\$file/Bangladesh%20-February%202005.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/C8823A1110E7DE88802570BA0054B659/$file/Bangladesh%20-February%202005.pdf) – Accessed 6 November 2006.
4. Norwegian Refugee Council 2006, ‘Bangladesh: minorities increasingly at risk of displacement’, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website, 28 March  
[http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/\(httpCountrySummaries\)/514CFB22071BDA03C125713700436D1D?OpenDocument&count=10000](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpCountrySummaries)/514CFB22071BDA03C125713700436D1D?OpenDocument&count=10000) – Accessed 4 April 2006.
5. Amnesty International 2006, *Bangladesh: Briefing to Political parties for a human rights agenda*, October.
6. ‘Hindu festival in Bangladesh begins amid tight security’ 2002, *Dow Jones International News*, 11 October. (FACTIVA)
7. Rahman. S.A. 2001, ‘Indian parties plead Hindu refugees’ cause’, *The Washington Times*, 10 December. (FACTIVA)

8. 'Hindu families fleeing Bangladesh' 2001, *The Hindu*, 24 October. (FACTIVA)
9. 'Hindus fleeing Bangladesh' 2001, *The Hindu*, 22 October. (FACTIVA)
10. 'Bangla Hindu Influx into Northeast India; Dhaka's disclaimer and New Delhi's tacit approval' 2003, *The South Asian*, 23 December  
[http://www.thesouthasian.org/archives/2003/bangla\\_hindu\\_influx\\_into\\_north.html](http://www.thesouthasian.org/archives/2003/bangla_hindu_influx_into_north.html) – Accessed 6 November 2006.
11. 'Bengali Language At Cornell' 2006, Cornell University Department of Asian Studies website, 27 July <http://lrc.cornell.edu/asian/courses/bengali> – Accessed 6 November 2006.
12. 'Languages of Bangladesh' 2005, Ethnologue.com website  
[http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_country.asp?name=Bangladesh](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=Bangladesh) – Accessed 6 November 2006.