

# **BANGLADESH 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution designates Islam as the state religion but upholds the principle of secularism. It prohibits religious discrimination and provides for equality for all religions. The government continued to provide guidance to imams throughout the country on the content of their sermons in its stated effort to prevent militancy and monitor mosques for “provocative” messaging. In March police completed the investigation of the case involving the 2016 killing of 22 persons, most of them non-Muslims, at the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka and forwarded it for prosecution. Legal proceedings against the attackers continued through year’s end. On March 30, led by a local political Awami League party leader, approximately 80 armed members of the Muslim community in Jamalpur District attacked members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community at an Ahmadiyya mosque, injuring 22 Ahmadis. Despite government orders to the contrary, village community leaders, often working together with local religious leaders, continued using extrajudicial fatwas to punish individuals, mostly women, for perceived “moral transgressions.” In April the government announced its intent to fund an approximately 76 billion taka (\$904.76 million) project to construct madrassahs in every electoral constituency. Various local organizations and media reports said the project was a political tactic by the government to use religion to influence voters during an election year. Members of religious minorities, including Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians, who were sometimes also members of ethnic minorities, stated the government remained ineffective in preventing forced evictions and land seizures stemming from land disputes. The government continued to place law enforcement personnel at religious sites, festivals, and events considered possible targets for violence.

In June unidentified individuals killed self-described secular writer and activist Shahjahan Bachchu. Security forces stated Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS)-linked individuals may have been responsible for killing Bachchu, a former leader of the Communist Party of Bangladesh and known for his secular beliefs and writings, for “offending Islam.” In March unidentified individuals killed a Hindu priest in Chatmohar Upazila in Pabna District. According to press reports, law enforcement suspected individuals with anti-Hindu sentiments may have killed the priest. In February approximately 30 Muslims attacked a Christian home in Vatar District and injured three family members. A police investigation continued at year’s end. Human rights organization Odhikar documented one killing and 34

cases of violent attacks resulting in injuries targeting Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians.

In meetings with government officials and in public statements, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, the U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh, and other embassy representatives spoke out against acts of violence in the name of religion and encouraged the government to uphold the rights of minority religious groups and foster a climate of tolerance. The Ambassador and other embassy staff met with local government officials, civil society members, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and religious leaders to continue to underscore the importance of religious tolerance and explore the link between religion, religious freedom, and violent extremism. The U.S. government provided more than \$345 million in humanitarian assistance to overwhelmingly Muslim ethnic Rohingya who fled Burma.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 159.5 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2013 census, Sunni Muslims constitute 89 percent of the population and Hindus 10 percent. The remainder of the population is predominantly Christian (mostly Roman Catholic) and Theravada-Hinayana Buddhist. The country also has small numbers of Shia Muslims, Baha'is, animists, Ahmadi Muslims, agnostics, and atheists. Many of these communities estimate their respective numbers to be between a few thousand and 100,000 adherents.

Many ethnic minorities practice minority religions and are concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and northern districts. The Garo in Mymensingh are predominantly Christian as are some of the Santal in Gaibandha. Most Buddhists are members of the indigenous (non-Bengali) populations of the CHT. Bengali and ethnic minority Christians live in communities across the country, with relatively high concentrations in Barishal city and Gournadi in Barishal District, Baniarchar in Gopalganj District, Monipuripara and Christianpara in Dhaka city, and in the cities of Gazipur and Khulna.

The largest noncitizen population is Rohingya, nearly all Muslim. According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), approximately 33,000 Rohingya refugees from Burma are officially registered in the country and are residing in the two official refugee camps within Cox's Bazar District. The government and UNHCR estimate another 900,000 to 1,000,000 Rohingya from Burma are in Cox's Bazar District, including an estimated 450 Hindu Rohingya.

In August 2017, approximately 730,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh following the start of violence in Burma's Rakhine State.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

According to the constitution, “the state religion of the Republic is Islam, but the State shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and other religions.” The constitution also stipulates the state should not grant political status in favor of any religion. It also provides for the right to profess, practice, or propagate all religions “subject to law, public order, and morality” and states religious communities or denominations have the right to establish, maintain, and manage their religious institutions. The constitution stipulates no one attending any educational institution shall be required to receive instruction in, or participate in ceremonies or worship pertaining to, a religion to which he or she does not belong.

Under the penal code, statements or acts made with a “deliberate and malicious” intent to insult religious sentiments are subject to fines or up to two years in prison. Although the code does not further define this prohibited intent, the courts have interpreted it to include insulting the Prophet Muhammad. The criminal code allows the government to confiscate all copies of any newspaper, magazine, or other publication containing language that “creates enmity and hatred among the citizens or denigrates religious beliefs.” The law applies similar restrictions to online publications. While there is no specific blasphemy law, authorities use the penal code as well as a section of the Information and Communication Technology Act to charge individuals. The Digital Security Act, passed by parliament in September, criminalizes publication or broadcast of “any information that hurts religious values or sentiments.”

The constitution prohibits freedom of association if an association is formed for the purpose of destroying religious harmony or creating discrimination on religious grounds.

Individual houses of worship are not required to register. Religious groups seeking to form associations with multiple houses of worship, however, must register with either the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) as an NGO if they receive foreign assistance for development projects or with the Ministry of Social Welfare if they do not. The law requires that the NGOAB approve and monitor all foreign-funded

projects. The NGOAB director general has the authority to impose sanctions on NGOs for violating the law, including fines of up to three times the amount of the foreign donation or closure of the NGO. NGOs also are subject to penalties for “derogatory” comments about the constitution or constitutional institutions (i.e., the government). Expatriate staff must receive a security clearance from the National Security Intelligence Agency, Special Branch of Police, and Directorate General of Forces Intelligence.

Registration requirements and procedures for religious groups are the same as for secular associations. Registration requirements with the Ministry of Social Welfare include submission of certification that the name being registered is not taken; provision of the bylaws/constitution of the organization; a security clearance for leaders of the organization from the national intelligence agency; minutes of the meeting appointing the executive committee; list of all executive committee and general members and photographs of principal officers; work plan; copy of the deed or lease of the organization’s office and a list of property owned; budget; and a recommendation by a local government representative.

Requirements to register with the NGOAB are similar.

Family law concerning marriage, divorce, and adoption has separate provisions for Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. These laws are enforced in the same secular courts. A separate civil family law applies to mixed faith families or those of other faiths or no faith. The family law of the religion of the two parties concerned governs their marriage rituals and proceedings. A Muslim man may have as many as four wives, although he must obtain the written consent of his existing wife or wives before marrying again. A Christian man may marry only one woman.

Hindu men may have multiple wives. Officially, Hindus have no options for divorce, although informal divorces do occur. Women may not inherit property under Hindu law. Buddhists are subject to Hindu law. Divorced Hindus and Buddhists may not legally remarry. Divorced men and women of other religions and widowed individuals of any religion may remarry. Marriage between members of different religious groups is allowed and occurs under civil law. To be legally recognized, Muslim marriages must be registered with the state by either the couple or the cleric performing the marriage; however, some marriages are not. Registration of a marriage for Hindus and Christians is optional, and other faiths may determine their own guidelines.

Under the Muslim family ordinance, a Muslim man may marry women of any Abrahamic faith; however, a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim. Under the ordinance, a widow receives one-eighth of her husband's estate if she is his only wife, and the remainder is divided among the children; each female child receives half the share of each male child. Wives have fewer divorce rights than husbands. Civil courts must approve divorces. The law requires a Muslim man to pay a former wife three months of alimony, but these protections generally apply only to registered marriages; unregistered marriages are by definition undocumented and difficult to substantiate. Authorities do not always enforce the alimony requirement even in cases involving registered marriages.

Alternative dispute resolution is available to all citizens, including Muslims, for settling family arguments and other civil matters not related to land ownership. With the consent of both parties, lawyers may be identified to facilitate the arbitration, the results of which may be used in court.

Fatwas may be issued only by Muslim religious scholars, and not by local religious leaders, to settle matters of religious practice. Fatwas neither may be invoked to justify meting out punishment, nor may they supersede existing secular law.

Religious studies are compulsory and part of the curriculum for grades three through 10 in all public government-accredited schools. Private schools do not have this requirement. Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian students receive instruction in their own religious beliefs, although the teachers are not always adherents of the students' faith.

The code regulating prisons allows for observance of religious commemorations by prisoners, including access to extra food on feast days or permission to fast for religious reasons. The law does not guarantee prisoners regular access to clergy nor regular religious services, but prison authorities may arrange special religious programs for them. Prison authorities are required to provide prisoners facing the death penalty access to a religious figure from a religion of their choice before execution.

A 2001 law allows the government to return property confiscated from individuals, mostly Hindus, whom it declares to be an enemy of the state. In the past, authorities used it to seize property abandoned by minority religious groups, especially Hindus, who fled the country, particularly following the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

In March police completed the investigation of the case involving the July 2016 killing of 22 persons, most of them non-Muslims, at the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka and forwarded it for prosecution. The attackers singled out non-Muslims and killed the victims with machetes and firearms. In August a Dhaka court accepted the charges against the attackers. At year's end, six of the attackers remained in jail, while another two fled the country. Legal proceedings against the attackers continued through the end of the year.

On May 8, prosecutors announced the conviction of five suspects, two of whom received the death penalty, for killing Rajshahi University professor Reazul Karim Siddique in a 2016 machete attack. Prosecutor Entajul Haque stated the five suspects belonged to terrorist organization Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh, also known as a Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh or ISIS-B, a militant Islamic group outlawed by the government. Law enforcement officials stated the killing of Siddique was one of many attacks on individuals espousing secular beliefs in the last three years.

The government's investigation into the 2016 killings of six secular bloggers, online activists, writers, and publishers remained inconclusive, according to press reports. Police had not charged any individuals by year's end.

Legal proceedings against the three suspects allegedly involved in the killing of atheist blogger Avijit Roy continued at year's end. In 2017, police announced they had detained Abu Siddiq Sohel, whom they said admitted to involvement in the 2015 killing of Roy, a critic of religious extremism. Also in 2017, police said they arrested two other individuals, Arafat Rahman and Mozammel Hossain, in connection with Roy's killing. Machete-wielding assailants hacked to death Roy, a U.S. citizen of Bangladeshi origin, while he accompanied his wife home from a Dhaka book fair. The press reported police suspected Ansarullah Bangla Team, a militant Islamic organization claiming association with AQIS – accused of other acts of violence and banned by the government – was involved in Roy's killing. A police official identified Rahman as a member of Ansarullah Bangla Team. The press also reported Rahman confessed to involvement in the killings of four other secular activists.

According to media reports, on March 30, approximately 80 armed members of the Muslim community in Jamalpur District attacked members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community at an Ahmadiyya mosque, injuring 22 Ahmadis. Ahmadiyya Muslim imam SM Asaduzzaman Razib stated Awami League Religious Affairs Secretary for Madarganj Upazila Monirul Islam Monir instigated the attack. When police responded to the incident, both sides agreed to refrain from any further violence. Members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community said the attack was a result of leaders of Jamalpur District's Muslim congregation's *Waz Mahfil* (religious discussion) attempt to provoke its members to support turning the country into a fundamentalist and militant state.

By year's end, the government stated it had compensated and otherwise assisted 70 Santal Christian families who were victims of attacks, arson, and gunshot wounds allegedly involving local authorities and law enforcement in 2016. According to media reports, at year's end, the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) had not filed charges against a parliamentarian from the ruling Awami League party and a local civil servant reportedly involved in the attacks. Three Santal Christians were killed in the 2016 attack; in 2017, the government removed the superintendent of police of Gaibandha District and the entire police force from the Govidaganj Sub-District to comply with a High Court order. In 2017 personnel from the PBI detained Shah Alam, a Union Council member and one of the 33 accused in the case.

Human rights organizations reported that, despite longstanding government orders to the contrary, village community leaders, often together with local religious leaders, continued to use extrajudicial fatwas to punish individuals, mostly women, for perceived "moral transgressions," such as adultery and other illicit sexual relations. From January to December the human rights organization Ain o Salish Kendra documented seven incidents of punishments under fatwas, including societal shunning, whipping, and forced interim marriages (a formality enabling a couple to remarry one another after the wife briefly marries and then divorces a new "interim" spouse), compared with 10 in 2017. In 2017, the High Court ordered a local government entity to report on action it had taken against the perpetrators of the extrajudicial punishment meted out to a man and woman in 2016 in Komolganj Upazila of Maulvibazar District for reported moral transgressions. No new developments regarding the case were reported at year's end.

In October unidentified individuals destroyed a Buddhist monastery and statue in Khagrachhari District. According to press reports, no eyewitnesses were present during the destruction of the structures; however, community members said local

individuals were responsible for the destruction. The local governmental administration told members of the community it would rebuild the monastery and statue. The army supervised the reconstruction of the monastery. The Chittagong Hill Tracts commission condemned the incident and demanded the perpetrators be brought to justice. A police investigation continued through the end of the year.

Although most mosques were independent of the state, the government continued to influence the appointment and removal of imams and provide guidance to imams throughout the country through the Islamic Foundation on some aspects of the content of their sermons, for example by issuing written instructions highlighting certain Quranic verses and quotations of the Prophet Muhammad. Religious community leaders said imams in all mosques usually continued to avoid sermons that contradicted government policy.

Early in the year, the government granted the Allama Fazlullah Foundation the requisite registration to work in Cox's Bazar. Two other religiously affiliated organizations that applied for registration to work in Cox's Bazar for Rohingya relief in 2017, Muslim Aid Bangladesh and Islamic Relief, remained banned throughout the year. In 2017, parliamentarian Mahjabeen Khaled stated to media, "It is believed they were running other operations under cover of relief efforts."

The government continued to prohibit transmission of India-based Islamic televangelist Zakir Naik's Peace TV Bangla, stating the program spread extremist ideologies, and closed "peace schools," which the government said reflected his teachings.

A government-run media monitoring cell established in 2016 with the stated intention of helping maintain religious harmony in the country by tracking media and blogs that write negatively about Hindu, Muslim, and other religious beliefs continued to function.

According to the Ministry of Land, authorities adjudicated approximately 15,224 of 118,173 property restitution cases filed under the Vested Property Return Act during the year. Of these judgements, the owners, primarily Hindus, won 7,733 of the cases, recovering 8,187.5 acres of land, while the government won the remaining 7,491 cases. Media reports, rights activists, and the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC) attributed the slow return of land seized under relevant legislation from Hindus who had left for India to judicial inefficiency and general government indifference.



Religious minorities continued to state minority students sometimes were unable to enroll in religion classes of their faith because of an insufficient number of minority teachers for mandatory religious education classes. In these cases, school officials generally allowed local religious institutions, parents, or others to hold religious studies classes for such students outside of school hours and sometimes exempted students from the religious education requirement.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs had a budget of 11.68 billion taka (\$139.05 million) for the 2018-19 fiscal year, which covers June 2018-July 2019. The budget included 9.21 billion taka (\$109.64 million) allocated for development through various autonomous religious bodies. The government provided the Islamic Foundation, administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, 8.24 billion taka (\$98.1 million). The Hindu Welfare Trust received 780.8 million taka (\$9.3 million), and The Buddhist Welfare Trust received 37.5 million taka (\$446,000) of the total development allocation. While the Christian Welfare Trust did not receive development funding from the 2018-19 budget, it received 2.8 million taka (\$33,300) to run its office.

In April the government announced it would fund an approximately 76 billion taka (\$904.76 million) project to construct madrassahs in every electoral constituency in the country. Under the two-year project, 300 members of parliament would receive funding to construct a five-story building in each electoral constituency. According to press reports, the project was in response to parliamentarians citing the dilapidated conditions of madrassah structures in their constituencies. A combination of news reports and think tanks criticized the project, stating the government's use of public funds for such projects was a political tactic by the government to use religion to influence voters prior to national parliamentary elections in December.

According to press reports, in November the government delayed national student examinations so Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina could attend a Qawmi madrassah rally in favor of the Awami League and chaired by Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh Chief Shah Ahmed Shafi. Hefazat-e-Islam is a self-defined Islamist advocacy group including madrassah teachers and students. According to press reports, the Hefazat-e-Islam rally was conducted to express gratitude for the government's formal recognition of the Qawmi madrassah education system in 2017. The Qawmi madrassahs are independent community madrassahs with their own governing boards and are commonly viewed as more conservative than government-run madrassahs.

In September the *Daily Star* newspaper reported government involvement, through a local teachers' association, in the seizure of a Hindu temple and its surrounding land in Tangail District, in contravention of a court order and without requisite building permits. The report stated the association wanted to construct a multistory building on the site of the temple that many in the community said would be used for commercial purposes. The *Daily Star* reported that in January a court in Tangail District issued an order ordering a halt to the construction, but construction on the temple's site continued, in what the press report said was due to the ruling Awami League's alleged involvement in the project.

Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and members of other minority religious communities, who are also sometimes members of ethnic minority groups, continued to report several property and land ownership disputes and forced evictions, including by the government, which remained unresolved at year's end. According to minority religious associations, such disputes occurred in areas near new roads or industrial development zones, where land prices had recently increased. They also stated local police, civil authorities, and political leaders sometimes enabled property appropriation for financial gain or shielded politically influential property appropriators from prosecution. Some human rights groups, including Odhikar, continued to attribute the lack of resolution of some of these disputes to ineffective judicial and land registry systems and the targeted communities' insufficient political and financial clout rather than government policy disfavoring religious or ethnic minorities.

According to religious rights groups, in April local Awami League politicians seized and illegally occupied one acre of land from a Christian family in Bagerhat District. Those allegedly responsible donated a portion of the land for local school use in an effort to conceal the illegal seizure and occupation, and they threatened the family with physical harm if members of the family pursued legal proceedings against the alleged culprits. Members of civil society attributed the alleged illegal seizure and occupation to a pending 1984 legal case between feuding family members over the land, which the occupiers allegedly exploited.

The government continued to place law enforcement personnel at religious sites, festivals, and events considered potential targets for violence, including the Hindu festival of Durga Puja, Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter, and the Buddhist festival of Buddha Purnima.

According to religious advocacy groups, the government provided extra security to protect Buddhist monasteries in Chittagong and Dhaka in anticipation of possible

retaliation for the actions against the majority Muslim Rohingya by the military and civilians in Burma's Rakhine State. No attacks occurred during the year.

President Abdul Hamid continued to host receptions to commemorate each of the principal Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian holidays and emphasized the importance of religious freedom, tolerance, and respect for religious minorities.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

In June unidentified individuals killed writer and self-described activist Shahjahan Bachchu. Security forces stated AQIS-linked individuals may have been responsible for killing Bachchu, a former leader of the Communist Party of Bangladesh known for his secular beliefs and writings, for "offending Islam."

According to press reports, on March 6, unidentified individuals killed a Hindu priest, Haradhan Bhattacharya, and stole gold and cash from his nephew's home in Pabna District, Chatmohar Upazila. According to press reports, law enforcement believed individuals motivated by anti-Hindu sentiment may have killed the priest. According to press reports, a witness said she saw a young female in a burqa flee the scene. Investigation of the case continued through the end of the year.

According to the Bangladesh Christian Association, on February 13, approximately 30 Muslims attacked a Christian family's home and attempted to seize the family's land and small business in Vatarra District. Association leaders said three members of the Christian community were injured. Police continued to investigate the case through year's end.

Law enforcement concluded one of eight investigations regarding a 2016 attack on Hindu individuals, homes, and temples in Brahmanbaria District. By year's end, approximately 228 were charged and pending prosecution. Attackers injured more than 100 individuals and vandalized 52 Hindu homes and 15 temples in response to a Hindu resident's Facebook post showing a Hindu deity pasted over the Kaaba in Mecca. The National Human Rights Commission stated the attack was orchestrated to drive Hindus from the area to obtain their land. Of the 104 persons detained for suspected involvement in the attacks, all but one was released on bail.

According to Odhikar, acts of violence targeting religious minorities or their property resulted in the death of one person and injuries to 34 from January to December, compared with none killed and seven injured in 2017. Attackers destroyed 49 statues, monasteries, or temples, compared with 132 in 2017, and

destroyed no homes, compared with 12 homes in 2017. The motivation for these incidents was often unclear. Some NGO representatives said the increase in violence targeting religious minorities and their properties could be due to increasing impunity.

The BHBCUC compiled 806 reports of violations of minority rights, including religious minorities, from newspaper reports during the year, compared with 380 in 2017. Violations included killings, attempted killings, death threats, assaults, rapes, kidnappings, and attacks on homes, businesses, and places of worship. According to the BHBCUC, the primary motivation for most of the incidents was a desire to seize real property, steal, or extort money.

According to the *Hindu Post* newspaper, 338 hate crimes occurred against members of the Hindu community during the year. The hate crimes included, but were not limited to, physical attacks, including killings and rapes, and real and personal property destruction. According to media reports, in May a fifth-grade Hindu girl was raped in Manikganj District of Gheor Upazila as she was traveling to a Hindu religious festival. The young girl was lured into an open agricultural field by a local resident, Jony Miah, where, joined by two of his accomplices, Rubel Islam and Shahidul Islam, the three began to rape her. Local inhabitants caught the three perpetrators in the act but soon released them. According to press reports, a local union council (*parishad*) member, Mujibur Rahman, tried to pressure the victim's family to remain silent and attempted to offer the family an approximately \$1,200 settlement. When the victim's family refused, Rahman and others threatened the family. The victim's brother filed a criminal case against the alleged perpetrators. Admitting he had attempted to settle the case quietly, Rahman said, "We tried to hush the matter as the girl was young and belonged to a different religion."

Some Buddhists continued to say they feared local Muslims would commit acts of vengeance against them in reaction to the Burmese Buddhists' mistreatment of the Muslim Rohingya in Burma; however, no cases were reported during the year. The Bangladesh United Buddhist Forum, formed in 2017, announced it would publicly celebrate Buddhist holidays during the year. In 2017, the forum curtailed its public celebrations of Buddhist holidays to donate to the Rohingya relief effort.

NGOs continued to report tensions in the CHT between the predominantly Muslim Bengali settlers and members of indigenous groups, primarily Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian, largely over land ownership. The Kapaeeng Foundation recorded 70 instances of human rights abuses in the CHT from January to June. These abuses included rape, unlawful evictions, and arbitrary arrests affecting primarily

Buddhists, but also Christians and Hindus. The government continued to work to resolve land ownership disputes affecting indigenous non-Muslims, using a 2017 amendment to the law providing for more inclusive decision making and a harmonization of the law with the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord. According to some members of the indigenous community, procedural issues had delayed resolution of many of their property disputes. In October Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina publicly urged peace and harmony in the CHT at the inauguration of the Sheikh Hasina Chattogram Hill Tracts Complex in Dhaka.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The U.S. Ambassador, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and embassy staff met with officials from the Office of the Prime Minister, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Social Welfare, and local government representatives to underscore the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. They discussed the interface between religion, religious freedom, and violent extremism, and the importance of integrating religious freedom and other human rights in security policy. Embassy officials stressed the importance of respecting religious minorities' viewpoints, minority religious inclusion within society, and protecting religious minorities from extremist attacks.

The U.S. government provided more than \$345 million in humanitarian assistance to overwhelmingly Muslim ethnic Rohingya who fled Burma from August 2017 to December 2018. In April embassy officials and the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with government officials to discuss protection and humanitarian assistance for the approximately one million Rohingya from Burma living in the country. The Ambassador, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and other embassy officials also visited refugee camps and makeshift settlements in Cox's Bazar to hear directly from Rohingya refugees about their experiences. Religious leaders across various faiths said they were encouraged by the Ambassador at Large's visit and its importance for promoting religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation.

As part of community policing training, the embassy encouraged law enforcement officials to protect the rights of religious minorities.

Embassy officials attended public religious events demonstrating religious tolerance among religious groups. Embassy officials were invited to and attended several religious festivals celebrated by the Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim

communities and emphasized in these events the importance of tolerance and respect for religious minorities. In all these events, the Ambassador and other embassy officials emphasized the importance of religious tolerance and respect for diversity.

The embassy conducted a social media campaign throughout the year to promote religious freedom and tolerance. On January 16-19, the embassy launched a three-day social media campaign to commemorate Religious Freedom Day. The campaign reached more than 230,000 individuals on Facebook and used social media on *Jumma Mubarak* (early afternoon Friday prayers) to emphasize the U.S. government's commitment to promoting and protecting religious freedom at home and abroad. During the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom's visit in April, the embassy posted photographs on its Facebook page of his visit to Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, where he advocated for religious tolerance and religious freedom. In July the embassy posted photographs on its social media platform of religious leaders from Bangladesh at the first Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington D.C.

Embassy and other U.S. government officials expressed support for the rights of religious minorities and emphasized the importance of their protection. Embassy officials met regularly with a wide range of religious organizations and representatives, including the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, Bangladesh Christian Association, Buddhist Religious Welfare Trust, Christian Religious Welfare Trust, World Buddhist Association Bangladesh, Bangladesh Buddhist Federation, Chittagong Hill Tracts Land Commission, Bangladesh Prabarana Purnima Celebration Committee, Bangladesh Kathin Cibor Danustan Celebration Committee, International Buddhist Monastery of Dhaka, and the Aga Khan Foundation. Embassy officials met with a group of Rohingya imams on several visits to Rohingya refugee camps and makeshift settlements in Cox's Bazar District. In these meetings, embassy and other U.S. government officials and representatives from the various groups discussed the state of religious freedom in the country, identified challenges religious minorities encountered, and discussed the importance of religious tolerance.

Embassy officials met regularly with a working group of 11 foreign missions to discuss a broad range of human rights concerns, including religious freedom.