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April 30, 2015

TO: US House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific

Thank you for allowing me to testify about the ethnic cleansing of Hindus in Bangladesh. I want to thank Committee on Foreign Affairs Chairman Ed Royce and committee staff for working with me over the past year and a half to make these hearings happen.

In 1951, Hindus represented almost a third of East Pakistan's population. When East Pakistan became Bangladesh in 1971, they were less than one in five; thirty years later fewer than one in ten; and according to reliable estimates, only one in 15 today. If anyone is cannot see where this is going, look at Pakistan where Hindus are down to one percent; or at Afghanistan or Kashmir, where once thriving Hindu communities are all but gone.

The difference between those places and Bangladesh is that we have a chance to prevent the total destruction of the Hindu community there; and each of us has a moral imperative NOT to sit by idly. Let us start acting like moral individuals and stop sitting by idly; stop hiding behind our fear of loud ideologues; stop hiding behind a topsy-turvy world view in which their ideology is more important than people's lives; stop hiding behind the studied non-involvement of others; stop hiding behind the excuse that the "right" people have to confirm what we know before we act; stop hiding behind the let's-pretend-world in which ethnic cleansing is all right as long as we cover our eyes.

There is no question that Bangladesh's Hindu population is dying; neither is the fact that Hindus face ongoing attacks in Bangladesh. There are, however, some comforting myths to which people cling rather than face the rest of the truth. Unless we grow up and cast them aside with other childhood myths; then Hinduism in Bangladesh will be nothing more than a memory and we will be as shameful as those Europeans who closed their shutters in the 1940s while their Jewish neighbors were being carried off to their deaths. So, what are those deadly myths that must be cast aside?

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Myth #1: That somehow identifying the ethnic cleansing of Hindus in a Muslim-majority country is anti-Islam. What a deadly bit of nonsense that is. It comforts the cowardly into believing that standing still while others die is the moral thing to do. Fighting this evil is not the province of any religious community. It should move all decent people to action. I have stood shoulder to shoulder with Muslims who have been beaten by Bangladeshi police and by Islamists because they protested the ethnic cleansing of Hindus. I have spent time with Muslim police who on their own guard a Hindu village from Muslim attackers because, they told me, the government will do nothing. If recognizing the Nazi Holocaust is not anti-German, then this is not Islamophobic.

Myth #2: That Bangladesh is a “moderate” Muslim country. The word, moderate, has been misapplied so frequently that I really do not know what it means anymore. I DO know, however, that it does not apply to Bangladesh. Is a country that permits the ethnic cleansing of its non-Muslim population moderate? How about one with a radical Islamist party that is the third most powerful and a former and possibly future member of the ruling coalition? What about a country that silences journalists and authors by charging them with blasphemy, a capital offense (and I have been involved in defending at least two of them)? Is a country with laws that makes blasphemy a capital offense and allows forced conversion moderate? Is it even civilized? And what about a country that persecutes human rights activists or prohibits its citizens from simply visiting Israel? I could go on, but no need. Clearly, calling Bangladesh moderate is about as accurate as calling a cat a dog.

Myth #3: That the Awami League is any different from other parties in Bangladesh or that Hindus could expect justice under its rule. This could be the most pernicious lie because of its break on our will to save these innocents.

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Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League have had numerous opportunities to change their country's anti-Hindu laws and practice and in each case decided that Hindus just were not worth the effort. In May 2009, for instance, she told French naval commander Gerard Valin that her government would repeal the country's anti-minority laws—perhaps becoming the first sitting Prime Minister in modern times to admit that her country has anti-minority laws. True to form, she made that promise with no thought of keeping it.

Just before she took office, Bangladesh's Supreme Court issued a *rule nisi* asking the government to show cause why Bangladesh's racist Vested Property Act should not be declared contrary to the constitution and ruled null and void. Bangladesh's Vested Property Act was taken in whole cloth from Pakistan by the current Prime Minister's father and supposed "father" of all Bangladeshis. It legalizes official theft of Hindu property and its use to fill the coffers of whatever party is in power. The military leaders in charge at the time of the *rule nisi* told me that the matter exceeded their charter and that with elections about to be held they were leaving it to the next government to end to this terrible law that has allowed all but a small amount of Hindu owned land to be confiscated. Despite its landslide victory and rule without coalition partners, however, the Awami League ignored the court and left the law as the economic engine driving ethnic cleansing.

In 2011, the Supreme Court again tried to civilize the Awami League, asking the *Jatiya Sangsad* (or Bangladeshi parliament) to submit substitutes for a series of constitutional amendments passed under the Ershad dictatorship in the 1980s. And it did—for all except one: the Eighth Amendment, which made Islam the official state religion and provided government support for that majority religion with comparative disabilities for minority faiths. Many Hindus and other minorities have complained that this makes them feel like second-class citizens in their own country.

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All of that, however, pales in comparison with Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League's support for deadly attacks on Hindus. In January 2009, a consortium of Bangladeshi Hindu groups asked me to advise them on what to do now that the Awami League was in control. "The last thing you should do," I said, "is to go back to sleep." I urged them to push the Awami League to live up to its posturing as "pro-minority," which won it the vast majority of Hindu votes. Otherwise, I said, "we will see that their words are nothing more than words." Unfortunately, most of the leaders placed their trust in the new government rather than in themselves: a very bad decision.

- During the Awami League's first year in office, major anti-Hindu incidents occurred at the rate of almost one per week.
- The number and intensity of anti-Hindu atrocities did not drop the next year, which included one period with anti-Hindu actions every three days.
- The Hindu American Foundation, Bangladesh Minority Watch, and others document a similar level of atrocities in the third year, 2011.
- 2012 began with at least 1.25 similar incidents a week in the first quarter and ended with one a week during the fourth. In between, there was a nine day period in May with an abduction, a murder in broad daylight, and two gang rapes, one of a child on her way to a Hindu festival: four horrific crimes in nine days and no action against known perpetrators.

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Human rights activist Rabindra Ghosh, my own associates, and I investigated and confirmed these incidents. They were reported in *local* media, yet *major* media ignored them. All incidents:

- Were major crimes: murder, rape, child abduction, forced conversion, physical attacks, land grabs, religious desecration, and more.
- Occurred under Awami League rule.
- Were anti-Hindu and not just random.
- Were neither prosecuted nor did the government help retrieve victims; in some cases, it participated in the actions or their cover-ups.
- Were confirmed by at least two independent sources.

Life under the Awami League is better for Hindus?

- In 2009, there was a three-day attack on a poor Hindu community right behind a Dhaka police station. Police accompanied the attackers and supported their actions. Many of the poor Hindus they made homeless still roam the street of Dhaka.
- In 2012, angry mobs stormed a tiny Hindu village in a remote part of Dinajpur in northern Bangladesh, destroying homes and farms, looting possessions, and abusing women.

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- The government did not punish criminals in either case, participated in cover-ups, and threatened human rights activists investigating the incidents. I went to both places to see for myself, met with victims, and confirmed the attacks and the government's complicity.
- In December 2012, 21-year old Eti Biswas was abducted by local toughs and government officials after her family defied threats and would not abandon their land. Her family met me in Dhaka and asked me to help bring back their young daughter. Not only local officials but also high officials including the Bangladeshi Home Minister and perhaps even Sheikh Hasina herself were aware of what happened, including the government's tacit approval. Eti Biswas remains missing to this day, and the family remains devastated.
- Koli Goswami (21), Pradip Das (22), Subarna Biswas (17), and many other young Hindu women—taken and still missing, months or even years after their abduction, often forcibly converted to Islam; police justify their inaction by claiming it was “voluntary.” And it continues: Kona Rani Bepari (18) abducted and forcibly converted in March 2015, and many others. The government refused to prosecute and an Awami League berated Rabindra Ghosh, the human rights attorney who asked for his help.

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- Roti Bala Biswas (15), Napur Pandey (11) and many Hindu women and girls raped because the rape of Hindus is rarely prosecuted, punished even less, by this government. I have interviewed scores of women who described being gang raped, often as minors, often with husbands and fathers forced to watch before being killed. There was the 14-year-old girl who just 22 days after she and her family escaped to India described to me being gang raped. In Bangladesh, the rape of Hindu women and girls is *de facto* allowed if not encouraged.

Despite the egregiousness of these atrocities and the government's open support for them, the Bangladeshis are so confident of our cowardice that they do not see the need even to appear credible. In May 2012, I met with Bangladesh's ambassador in Washington, Akramul Qader, and confronted him with evidence I have gathered. It was an interesting encounter in which he issued successive denials after which I would provide evidence that rendered him either an ignorant fool or a liar. Each time that happened, he would act as if he just remembered the well-documented incident or atrocity. At one point, I pointed out that demographers have said that the precipitous population drop in Bangladesh's Hindu population could not have come about through demographic processes like birth rates or through voluntary emigration. Here was his response. He did not dispute the objective facts but asserted that it is voluntary: that they "cannot find suitable matches for their children, so they go to India where there are more Hindus." I have interviewed scores of Hindu refugees in India and not one said they left Bangladesh to find their children marriage partners

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He is not the only idiot in Sheikh Hasina's government. Not long ago in Dhaka, the Bangladeshi Home Minister, Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir, responded to the overwhelming evidence of atrocities against Hindus by saying that "union membership has declined in the US" and that "33 people were killed in Connecticut." Is he really that much of a fool or does he think I am? Other Bangladeshi officials admitted the problem, but only if I kept it anonymous as they feared reprisals.

So, what must Bangladesh do to re-join the community of civilized nations? And we cannot let them off the hook until they actually do these things, not just promise them as Sheikh Hasina did in 2009. Empty promises are the Bangladeshis' stock in trade as it tends to be all they need to win our acceptance.

- Admit its problem and stop denying it. Addicts know that the first step on the road to recovery is admitting that you have a problem. Is there any doubt that Bangladesh has a problem?
- Once it does, it can call the UN, from individual countries, and its own citizens for help in its recovery.
- Announce that henceforth, it will have zero-tolerance for anti-Hindu actions of the sort noted; and that officials who tolerate, cover-up, or participate in them will be dismissed, prosecuted, and punished.
- Go beyond words and announce a string of prosecutions for the worst of these crimes and for government officials who took part in them or obstructed justice. And it needs to prosecute them vigorously.
- Introduce in Parliament and use its political muscle to pass final repeal of the Vested Property Act.

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- Empanel an independent commission of academics, activists, and others to return seized property to their rightful owners or, if the latter prefer, provide just compensation for their losses.
- Extend official and effective protection to human rights activists attacked for their work, and prosecute their attackers.

And we must hold Bangladesh to a tight and specific deadline or impose consequences for non-action.

- Bangladesh is inordinately dependent on our imports of their goods, especially garments. They will not act because it is the right thing to do, but they will act (and we have experience with this) if they believe their economic interests are at stake. The prospect of trade sanctions for continued human rights violations will scare them straight.
- Bangladesh provides more UN peacekeepers than any other country. The prospect of losing that was the proximate reason why the military acted and took over the government in 2007—information I received from the military while I was in Dhaka during the coup. We provide a greater share of that support than any other nation and should have substantial influence.
- An increasing number of Bangladeshis are immigrating to the United States (legally and otherwise) because the country cannot support its population. Directed immigration laws and regulations could make that difficult and again motivate the Bangladeshi government to do the right thing

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We are the victims of our own good intentions: our tendency to accept the Bangladeshis' empty words, to hang on desperately to the wish that they are moderate and would not allow such things if they could stop it; and our desperate belief that the Awami League would act any better than its rivals.

While most people in my country remain uninformed about what is happening to Hindus in Bangladesh that is changing. Today is evidence of that. While major media still ignore the problem, more local and online media do not. On October 1, 2013, the Chicago suburb of Mount Prospect, Illinois, became the first US locality to issue a formal proclamation that recognized the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh and the lack of attention this serious issue receives. I urge US citizens to get other localities to make Mount Prospect the first of many to do so.

Just to make sure we do not lose the sense of urgency we need, in Gopalganj (represented by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina), ten Hindus sit falsely accused of murdering a man who attacked their temple and women. They have been denied due process and access to counsel. When the attorney their families hired petitioned the court for help, he was beaten in the court in front of the judge; Rabindra Ghosh has been attacked further for pursuing the matter all the way to the Bangladeshi Supreme Court, so far without relief. The International Commission of Jurists have called on the Bangladeshi government to rectify this breakdown in the rule of law, and the latter has ignored these and other calls. Meanwhile, the ten Hindus face the same fate that once awaited Jews in Iran and proselytizing Christians. Just how real is their danger? There were eleven, but one already has died in custody.

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For seven years, I have dedicated myself to stopping this human rights atrocity so we do not become like those who did not take action in time to save Jews in Nazi Europe, Tutsis in Rwanda, Igbos in Biafra, and so many others. Today can be a great first step in getting there—or we can allow our efforts to sit in a drawer and collect dust.

The choice—and history’s judgement—is in our hands.

Thank you.