

**Congressional Human Rights Caucus
Task Force for International Religious Freedom
India Caucus
Briefing**

**Religious Freedom Conditions in South Asia:
The Treatment of Religious Minorities**

**Tuesday, July 17, 2007
2200 Rayburn Building
2p-3:30p**

*By Ishani Chowdhury
Executive Director, Hindu American Foundation
www.HAFsite.org*

Three hundred thousand Kashmiri Hindus are living in refugee camps in India today—victimized by a militancy that started claiming Hindu lives in the Kashmir Valley in 1989. These Hindus are literally refugees in their own homeland. In 1947, the Hindu population in what is now Bangladesh was about 31%. In 2002, it was estimated to be about 9%. Pakistani Hindus numbered approximately 25% of the population in 1947, but by 1998, it had dwindled to 1.6%. During the Taliban regime, Afghani Hindus were required to wear yellow arm bands and fly yellow flags atop their houses reminiscent of the Nazi targeting of Jews. In the wake of the “War on Terror,” most of the minority Hindu population in Afghanistan fled overseas. But in June 2006, a German memo sent by Senator for Internal Affairs, Udo Nagel, demanded the voluntary, or else forcible deportation of these Hindu refugee families¹ to a country where their homes have been confiscated, temples destroyed, crematoriums shut down and parochial schools taken over by *madrassas* (Islamic seminaries). These are just some of the incidents that illustrate the fate of too many of the world’s Hindus. Despite a population of nearly one billion, they suffer in silence as their plight and misery is too often glossed over by the media, think tanks, government agencies, human rights organizations, leaders and the general public. These incidents are more than another depressing collage of dreadful images—I for one, am personally a living testament to one of the great, unknown tragedies affecting Asia today—I am a Hindu, and a Bengali who can no longer visit my ancestral land—a place where my extended family has lost its home, its moorings and its history—present-day Bangladesh.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh was created after the India-Pakistan War of 1971. This war was precipitated by the massacre of an estimated two million East Pakistani citizens and the ethnic cleansing of ten million of the mostly Hindu population. In the summary of his report dated November 1, 1971, US Senator Edward Kennedy (D - Massachusetts) wrote:

Field reports to the U.S. Government, countless eye-witness journalistic accounts, reports of International agencies such as World Bank and additional information available to the subcommittee document the reign of terror which grips East Bengal (East Pakistan). Hardest hit have been members of the Hindu community who have been robbed of their lands and shops, systematically slaughtered, and in some places, painted with yellow patches marked 'H'. All of this has been officially sanctioned, ordered and implemented under martial law from Islamabad.ⁱⁱ

This genocide has been largely erased from public memory and the perpetrators escaped unpunished though identified in an official report. According to Saleem Samad, journalist and human rights observer,ⁱⁱⁱ with the normal rate of population growth, the Hindu population in Bangladesh in 1991 should have been 32.5 million. The actual population was 12.5 million. By this calculation, **the number of Hindus missing from Bangladesh over two decades, ending in 1991, is already 20 million.**

The ethnic cleansing of Hindus in Bangladesh has included daily acts of murder, rape, kidnappings, temple destruction, and physical intimidation. As detailed in the Hindu American Foundation's third annual Hindu Human Rights Report titled, 'Hindus in South Asia and the Diaspora: A Survey of Human Rights 2006,' there were 461 such acts of violence targeting Hindus in just the nine months in 2006 for which data was available.

Legal assaults, by way of Enemy Property Act 1965 and its post-independence version, the Vested Property Act 1974, have affected nearly 1.2 million or 44% of the 2.7 million Hindu households. Under this law, which has not been repealed by any successive government, minority Hindus were identified as enemies and subsequently dispossessed of their properties. Individuals with direct ties to the Bangladesh National Party (BNP)-Islamist party alliance in power between 2001 and 2006, were beneficiaries of over 45% of lands confiscated. The time has come that such laws be repealed and lands restored to their rightful, original owners. The Hindu American Foundation also recommends that the United States and other donor nations must

demand accountability from the Bangladesh Government, and all aid to Bangladesh should be contingent on the improvement of the human rights situation.

India

Neighboring India's Hindu population, too, has a sobering tale. Though constituting 80.5% of the country's population, Hindus are minorities in six states in India - Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram.^{iv} Of these, the plight of the Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus) is the most heart wrenching of all. With history dating back over 5000 years, Kashmir has been a center of art, culture and religious life with ancient temples dotting this snow capped mountainous region of Northern India.

Modern Kashmir has been claimed by both Pakistan and India, and after their partition in 1947, Kashmir, which was then ruled by the Hindu king Hari Singh, joined the Indian Union after Pakistan's armed forces and militias invaded the border and sought to seize the kingdom.

The old princely state is now comprised of five regions: Kashmir, Jammu, Ladakh, the so-called Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) or Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), and the Northern Areas. The overall population in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir was estimated in 1981 at 7.7 million with Muslims (64.3%), Hindus (32.1%), Sikhs (2.16%), Buddhist (1.17%) and others, including Christians (0.26%).

And while the Pakistan occupied portion of Kashmir was already cleansed of all Hindus prior to the partition of India in 1947, and is comprised of mostly Sunni Muslims, forty years later, a similar forced cleansing occurred in the Indian administered Kashmir region as more than 300,000 Hindus were driven out between 1989 and 1991 by Islamist militants logistically and militarily supported by Pakistan. Some say that the more realistic figure is nearly 400,000.^v

The 1990's followed with several terrorist attacks by Islamist militants within Kashmir and the rest of India at the height of a proxy war.

Today, the selective slaughter of Hindus in the region continues with kidnappings, grenade attacks at wedding parties, temple destruction, the targeting of Village Defense Committees, death threats, and systematic torture. For example, the dreaded "butcher of Pandits," Bitta Karatay of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) was released from prison on bail in October 2006. He was arrested in 1990 for the killing of more than thirty Pandits and creating such fear in the small Hindu minority community that it was one of the major triggers for the mass fleeing of Pandits from the Kashmir Valley.^{vi}

Raj Koul, Mid-West Director the Indo-American Kashmir Forum, a organization comprised of Kashmiri Pandits fighting to bring attention to these tragedies and restore the rights of the Valley's Hindus, recounts the story of how elderly uncle who refused to flee was kidnapped and found hanging from a tree, his eyes gouged out and genitals cut off.^{vii} Pakistan inspired radical Islamist terrorist organizations, such as the *Laskkar-e-Tayyiba (LT)* and the *Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)*, continue to spread terror across the Valley's remaining Hindu population.

The Indian Government must create an environment conducive to the resettlement of Kashmiri Hindus, with adequate protection and full property rights restored to these families. Likewise, the government of Pakistan must permanently end its sponsorship of terror via direct military aid to terror groups, sponsorship of terror camps in Pakistan and covert support to terrorists by its ISI spy service.

Pakistan

Just as the Pakistan government sponsors a proxy war through its support to terrorist outfits banned by the U.S. State Department, Pakistan itself witnessed blatant acts of violence against its minority population. In 1947, the Hindu population was estimated at 25%, but by 1998 had dropped to 1.6%. Those remaining tend to be poor and rural, lacking both economic and political prowess.

Government regulations and laws shaped by *Sharia* injunctions discriminate against Hindus and other minorities. Section 295-C of the Pakistan penal code mandates the death sentence for blasphemy against the Prophet or desecration of the Koran. Dozens of blasphemy cases are pending in the courts, and the accused spend long periods in jails under brutal conditions once the accusation has been made, although most such allegations of desecration are the result of personal grudges. With the exception of lone Chief Justice Rana Bhagwandas, almost no Hindu holds any public position of significance in government, military, business, or society.^{viii}

Alongside the acts of desecration and destruction of Hindu temples and lands, theft and looting of Hindu property, discrimination, and abuse, violence against women is rampant in the form of kidnappings, rape and intimidation. Most worrisome is the trend of kidnapping of underage Hindu girls and their forcible conversion to Islam. At least nineteen cases of abduction have taken place in Karachi alone, and six in the Jacobabad and Larkana districts^{ix}. Although the exact number is unknown, more than 5000 Hindus were forced to escape from the unrest in Balochistan and enter Sindh in 2005. Militant Islamist groups have desecrated Hindu temples,

set their homes on fire, and destroyed Hindu shops and property. Here too, Hindu females, particularly school students, were forcibly converted to Islam.^x

In 2006, the United States financed Pakistan's educational system with \$62.7 million.^{xi} However, Pakistani government-sponsored textbooks approved by the National Curriculum Wing of the Federal Ministry of Education, continue to be riddled with inflammatory and derogatory statements against Hindus. For example, a fifth grade textbook states "The Hindu has always been an enemy of Islam."^{xii}

Minorities will continue to be targeted in Pakistan if the government does not cease to mandate religious identification on passports, repeal blasphemy laws, and set up Human Rights Commission and/or a National Minorities Commission to monitor the human rights condition and enable minorities to enjoy the rights provided to the majority population. Any aid to Pakistan should be contingent on Pakistan's acceptance of a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute, and protection of its minority population.

Afghanistan

As I mentioned before, the human rights situation faced by small remaining Hindu population in Afghanistan is deplorable. While Hindus have a proud history in Afghanistan dating centuries before Alexander's time, the dismal condition of the remaining Afghani Hindu is a story ignored by the world today. Hindus and Sikhs constituted about 1% of the country's population before the Taliban era, and co-existed peacefully with the majority Muslim population.^{xiii} By 1994, during Taliban rule, 50,000 Hindus had left Afghanistan. A sizeable number of refugees joined family members in Germany. The U.S. has a small community of Hindu and Sikh Afghan refugees, totaling about 500-600 people. The estimated population of Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan in 2005 and 2006 was about 1,200 families, of which 350 lived in Kabul.^{xiv}

Hindus continue to have difficulty sending their children to schools, as they generally do not send their children to the unsafe, and often Islamic based public schools. They receive neither government nor international assistance for their own schools. Kandahar still does not have any schools managed or run by Hindus, and children still attend classes held in the temple. Muslims have occupied two of the Hindu schools rendering Hindu educational activities impossible. In Khost, Jalalabad and Ghazni, schools are also desperately needed.^{xv}

Despite minorities continuing to flee the country due to its deteriorating human rights situation, many governments, such as Germany and Great Britain, continue to exert pressure to those who have sought asylum in those nations.^{xvi} India, which has more than 8,000 Afghani

refugees, has raised the application fee for naturalization from 2,100 rupees (US\$49) to 15,000 rupees (US\$347).^{xvii} This is particularly disconcerting when taking into account the economic hardships these refugees face.

With the further destabilization of the country by the Pakistan inspired Islamic seminaries that exhort violence and subsequently send their students through the porous Afghan border, it is imperative that the Pakistan government cease such acts immediately, as this will clearly affect Hindus and the other minority population.^{xviii} The Afghan government must work to ensure existing Hindu temples and institutions are restored rehabilitated, while the U.S. government should apply pressure to the German and British governments to cease involuntary deportation of refugees.

Conclusion

Hindus continue to face persecution, not only in South Asia, but other parts of the world, including the Gulf countries, Caribbean nations and South East Asia. Sadly, with the lack of media attention, documentation by human rights organizations, think tanks or a voice from our leaders, the future of the Hindu populations in many of these countries can be considered tenuous at best. Hindus, adherents of a tolerant faith that accepts a multiplicity of paths to realizing Truth, carry an important message of pluralism and understanding that is a critical element of the global dialogue today. Tragically, if the spiral towards radical Islamist fundamentalism continues in many of these countries, there will be others, like myself, who will be here to tell the tale of their ancestors that once lived prosperously in a country like Bangladesh that now considers them an enemy of the state.

ⁱ “German Deportation Order on Afghan Refugees Unconscionable,” Hindu American Foundation, July 18, 2006, http://www.hafsite.org/media_press_release_germandeportation.htm

ⁱⁱ “Crisis in South Asia.” Report by Senator Edward Kennedy to the Subcommittee Investigating the Problem of Refugees and Their Settlement. Submitted to U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee. November 1, 1971. U.S. Government Press, pp. 6-7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Saleem Samad, an Ashoka Fellow (USA) is a journalist, press watchdog and correspondent of Paris-based Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), Paris, Special Correspondent of Bangladesh Observer and Daily Times (Lahore).

^{iv} Iype, George, “Sangh Parivar Demands Minority Status for Hindus in Six States,” Rediff, January 15, 1999.

^v “Panun Kashmir: A Homeland for Kashmiri Pandits.” Panun Kashmir. December 28, 1991. <http://www.panunkashmir.org/margdarshan.html>

^{vi} Ishfaq-Ul-Hassan. “‘Butcher’ of Pandits back in Kashmir hometown.” Daily News & Analysis. October 27, 2006. <http://www.dnaindia.com/report.asp?NewsID=1060576>

^{vii} Working, Russell, “Hindus Facing Persecution,” Chicago Tribune, July 13, 2007.

^{viii} “Hindu named Pakistan’s Chief Justice.” Rediff. September 1, 2005. <http://in.rediff.com/news/2005/sep/01pak2.htm>

-
- ^{ix} Grant Swank. "Kidnap Hindu girl, force marriage to Muslim: Pakistan." The American Daily, November 11, 200. <http://www.americandaily.com/article/10362>
- ^x Wilson, John. "Musharraf: Buccaneer in Baluchistan," The Pioneer, August 22, 2001.
- ^{xi} Pakistan Link. "US will provide \$62.7 million for education," July 25, 2006, www.pakistanlink.com/Headlines/July06/25/10.htm
- ^{xii} "Hindu, Enemy of Islam." Outlook India, October 10, 2005. <http://outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20051010&fname=Pakistan+%28F%29&sid=2>
- ^{xiii} Andar. "Hindus and Sikhs in Kabul – a Fact Sheet." Foundation for Culture and Civil Society, September 23, 2003; Afghan Professional Alliance for Minority Rights. <http://www.afghanfccs.org/general-file/hindus-and-sikh.htm>
- ^{xiv} James Rupert, "Amid faint hope, keeping the faith." Newsday, July 9, 2006, <http://www.newsday.com/news/nationworld/world/ny-woreli044810640jul09.0.269168.story?coll=ny-worldnews-print>
- ^{xv} Andar. "Hindus and Sikhs in Kabul – a Fact Sheet." Foundation for Culture and Civil Society, September 23, 2003; Afghan Professional Alliance for Minority Rights. <http://www.afghanfccs.org/general-file/hindus-and-sikh.htm>
- ^{xvi} "German deportation order on Afghan refugees unconscionable." Hindu American Foundation, July 18, 2006, http://www.hinduamericanfoundation.org/media_press_release_germandeportation.htm
- ^{xvii} Nayana Bose. "Afghan refugees in search of Indian identity." United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), March 18, 2005. <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=428c967e4&page=news>
- ^{xviii} Hemming, Jon, "Afghan president pardons failed suicide bomber boy," Yahoo! News, June 15, 2007, http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20070715/wl_nm/afghan_bomber_dc_1