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## Background\_aims\_and\_objectives

### **European Human Rights Conference on Bangladesh** Extremism, Intolerance & Violence 17 June 2005

SOAS (School of Oriental & African Studies), University of London, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG

The worsening law & order situation, increased violation of human rights & persecution of minority religious groups, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, tribal communities, Ahmadiyyas, secular and progressive groups, and the rise of extremist armed groups in Bangladesh especially since 2001 is deeply worrying to all concerned with Bangladesh. A European conference in London is being called to highlight the deteriorating human rights situation in Bangladesh and to discuss and find strategies to address the human rights issues.

#### Aims & Objectives

The conference, organised by the 'Bangladesh Conference 2005 Steering Committee' chair Lord Avebury, Vice Chair of Parliamentary Human Rights Group (UK), brings together social scientists, researchers, academics, writers, artists and human rights activists. It will,

- highlight the deteriorating human rights situation especially in relation to Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, ethnic & tribal minorities, Ahmadiyyas, secular & progressive sections of community in Bangladesh.
- discuss and explore strategies to challenge and counter the religious extremists through a co-ordinated common platform.
- strengthen links and build up a network of progressive groups and individuals to stand up to religious intolerance and violent extremism.

#### Background information

Religious extremism and terrorism exploits the economic and political failures of the Middle East, Iraq, South Asia, East Asia and the Russian Federation, but also relies on ideologies that reject all secular governments as imperfect. The atrocities of 9/11, the Madrid bombings, the Bali bombings, and a large number of lesser acts of irrational violence pose a new and unique challenge to

peace and security throughout the world. The terrorists who commit these dreadful crimes are not linked together in a single worldwide hierarchical organisation; they belong to small groups or cells, whose only link is a millenarian ideology dedicated to the destruction of secular government and the advent of a society based on an imagined model of the early 7th century. Local problems everywhere are used as one means to attract people to this worldview, and the extremists then recruit, from the wider group of those who believe in this model, those who are prepared to achieve the goal by violence and martyrdom. In Bangladesh, the terrorist attacks of the last few years are not motivated by the aim of exterminating or exiling the minorities and producing a monolithic theocracy at home, but have a global agenda as well. This is why events in Bangladesh are matters of concern throughout the world.

### Bangladesh

The persecution of the minority communities in Bangladesh started soon after the general election in 2001, when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its allies, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikya Jote came to power. What began with attacks on the Hindu community was followed by attacks on the Christians, Buddhists, indigenous communities, and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. The largest opposition political party of Bangladesh, the Awami League, has also become the target of assassination, torture and harassment. Journalists, human rights activists, intellectuals, officers and employees of government, semi government and other organisations believing in secular democracy are also being persecuted.

None of the terrorists responsible for the crimes of violence against persons belonging to minority religious and ethnic groups, opposition parties and NGOs after the present government came into power in October 2001, have been brought to justice.

Amongst those targeted have been the UK High Commissioner, who was the victim of an assassination attempt on May 21, 2004, in which four people were killed. On August 21, 2004 the Leader of the Opposition, Sheikh Hasina narrowly escaped death in a grenade attack in which 21 people died, and on January 27, 2005 the former Foreign Minister, 73 year old Shah AMS Kibria, was killed in a grenade attack, which also left 6 others dead.

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### **Conference\_working\_session**

#### **Working sessions: Keynote paper presentations and themes**

##### **Working session 1, room G 60**

Human rights: Workshop Chair: Abbas Faiz, Amnesty International

Workshop Speakers:

- 1 Advocate Sultana Kamal: Datelines Dhaka: Current situation and an analysis of Human Rights in Bangladesh
- 2 Justice Shamsuddin Chowdhury: Human rights violation by law enforcement agencies (Clean Heart Operation, RAB etc)
- 3 Lutz Oette, Redress: Torture in Bangladesh 1971-2004
- 4 Ahmad Salim, Pakistan: Human Rights Violations of minorities
- 5 Advocate Mahbube Alam, President, Supreme Court Bar Association, Bangladesh
- 6 Advocate Sigma Huda, Bangladesh

##### **Working session 2, room G 59**

Persecution of minorities: Workshop Chair: Shelina Thawer, (Minority Rights Group International)

Workshop Speakers:

- 1 Sitangshu Guha: A Glimpse into the State-sponsored Campaign of Religious & Ethnic Cleansing in Bangladesh
- 2 Hironmoy Karlekar, India: Bangladesh: Next Afghanistan?
- 3 Mr Kumar Sivasish Roy: Jumma Peoples Network UK
- 4 Prof Salim Malek: Ahmadiyya community

- 5 Advocate Promode Mankin MP, President, Bangladesh Christian Association & Adibashi Forum: Indigenous communities of Bangladesh
- 6 Prof Ajoy Roy: Annada Prasad, Cries in silence & anguish

### **Working session 3, room G 52**

Rise of religious extremism & the threat to secular democracy:  
Workshop Chair: Prof Dr John Eade, University of Surrey

Workshop Speakers:

- 1 Dr Reza Kibria: Threat to secular democracy
- 2 Prof Muntassir Mamoon, Dhaka University
- 3 Barrister Shafique Ahmed, Bangladesh
- 5 Dr David Garbin, University of Surrey: Bangladeshi diaspora: religious trends, socio-cultural dynamics and transnational politics
- 6 Barrister Amirul Islam, Bangladesh

### **Working session 4, room Khalili Lecture Theatre**

International aspects: Workshop Chair: Justice K M Subhan

Workshop Speakers:

- 1 Maggie Bowden, Liberation
- 2 Elianna Moquette, Human Rights Watch
- 3 Roy Brown, President, International Humanist & Ethical Union: Islam & Fundamentalism: defending human rights at the UN
- 4 Ina Hume, Vanishing Rites: International perspectives on human rights violations by the Military in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

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**Conference\_resolutions**

**European Human Rights Conference on Bangladesh**  
Extremism, Intolerance & Violence  
17 June 2005

SOAS (School of Oriental & African Studies), University of London,  
Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, UK

## **Conference Resolutions**

Resolution concerning the persecution of and discrimination against the religious & ethnic minorities and political opponents, civil society NGOs, journalists and other groups in Bangladesh adopted at the European Human Rights Conference on Bangladesh on 17th June 2005 at SOAS, University of London:

This European Human Rights Conference on Bangladesh,

Recognizing that religious extremism is threatening democratic institutions and constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion in Bangladesh, and thus provoking intolerance towards minority ethnic and faith communities of Bangladesh:

Noting that wherever religious extremism has arisen, it has led to



violence, division, anarchy, intolerance and hatred, not only towards other communities within the state concerned, but also against people of other cultures and backgrounds:

Alarmed that the Bangladesh authorities have not only failed to stop extremist repression and violence, but have colluded with religious extremist groups to violate and usurp human rights of minority groups, namely, but not limited to, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Ahmadiyya Muslims, secular civil society members, NGOs, journalists and members of opposition parties:

Deploring the government ban on Ahmadiyya publication, which violates the freedom of religion and expression supposedly enshrined in the Constitution of Bangladesh:

Convinced that renaming of mosques and the burning of books and important historical documents is deeply resented and opposed by the vast majority of the people of Bangladesh;

Regretting Bangladesh Government's abject failure to effectively investigate and prosecute the criminals responsible for violent, grenade & bomb attacks on leading members of the opposition, the British High Commissioner, arts and cultural events, members and institutions of religious minorities and others;

1. Calls upon the government of Bangladesh to bring to justice the perpetrators and planners of violence in Bangladesh including the attackers on Anwar Chowdhury, the British High Commissioner; and Shah AMS Kibria, the former finance minister; to halt immediately extra judicial killings and custodial tortures, and to bring to justice those responsible for throwing grenades at the rally addressed by the Leader of the Opposition, HE Sheikh Hasina on 21st August 2004, in which scores of people were killed and maimed.
2. Further calls on the government to halt the abuse of human rights especially of minority faith communities and civil society members;
3. Demands that preparations be made to ensure a free and fair election under a neutral administration, conducted by an independent election commission along with the interim government, to be chosen in consultation with the opposition;
4. Urges the government of Bangladesh to safeguard the independence of the judiciary, and to prevent and reverse party politicisation of the police, administration and the judiciary;
5. Calls upon the government of Bangladesh to repeal the 5th and 8th amendment of the Constitution and the anti minority and racist laws such as the vested property legislation;
6. Demands the implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord of 1997 and an end to the demographic transformation of the CHT under military occupation,
7. Reminds the government of Bangladesh that in accordance with

the constitutional rights of the people, the ban on Ahmadiyya publication must be lifted, Ahmadiyya mosques must be restored to the community, and equal rights secured to the Ahmadiyya community and other minorities, in employment and the delivery of public services of Bangladesh.

**8.** Calls upon the government of Bangladesh to establish a permanent and independent minority and women's rights commission.

**9.** Demands that the government of Bangladesh undertake comprehensive and transparent investigation, with the aid of international intelligence agencies, in order to bring to justice those who smuggled truckloads of illegal arms (particularly those recovered from the government controlled jetties in Chittagong port, Bogra, Kuril, Buddha), including grenades, and to recover those arms which have already found their way into terrorist hands, and to publish a report on the origin of those arms, the persons and organisations involved in their smuggling.

**10.** Asks donors, including the World Bank, USAID, The EU and others, who will be participating in the Bangladesh Development Forum 2006, to concentrate on good governance, and in particular, on the maintenance of stable democracy in Bangladesh, based on respect for human rights, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary.

**11.** Decides to establish a European civil society network to monitor the progress of Bangladesh towards compliance with international human rights standards, to make representations to governments and to the UN Human Rights Commission and to hold further meetings.

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**Press\_statement\_by\_Lord\_Avebury**

**Bangladesh Conference 2005 Steering Committee  
Patron Lord Dholakia Chair Lord Avebury**

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19 June 05

**PRESS STATEMENT BY LORD AVEBURY, VICE-CHAIR,  
UK PARLIAMENTARY HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP**

Ref: European Human Rights Conference on Bangladesh  
Friday 17 June 2005 University of London.

Lord Avebury, Vice Chair of the UK Parliamentary Human Rights Group, and Chairman of the Steering Committee of the 'European Human Rights Conference on Bangladesh' held in SOAS, University of London on 17th June 2005, has issued the following statement in response to allegations of the Bangladesh High Commissioner in London.

I am disappointed by the false statement issued by the H E Mr A H

Mofazzal Karim, Bangladesh High Commissioner in London about the holding and conduct of the one day conference on Bangladesh. The UK Parliamentary Human Rights Group was one of the sponsors of this Conference and its aim was to provide an opportunity for a factual analysis of the very serious problems affecting secular political parties/groups as well as ethnic & religious minorities in context of the growing extremism and the worrying culture of impunity in Bangladesh.

These are areas of legitimate and continuing interest for the UK Parliament as well as the international community and it was hoped that the Bangladesh Government would use the occasion of the Conference to provide its inputs and engage in a constructive and mature manner.

We were very fair to the Government of Bangladesh in allotting them two slots in the Conference whereas all other groups including even the main opposition party, the Awami League were given only one slot filled by its representative, Saber Chowdhury.

The meeting did not "break up in disarray" but continued till 18:00 as scheduled and was participated by all including Advocate Sigma Huda.

All participants agreed the Conference was an outstanding success in bringing together representatives of all the beleaguered and persecuted groups, and in agreeing to further the initiative of the Conference by forming an international network.

The High Commissioner was interrupted during his presentation by other participants when he tried to assert there was no violation of human rights in Bangladesh and later on, in response to questions when he stated that "many" BNP MPs were assassinated during the 1996-2001 Awami League term of office. The participants also objected when he appeared to assert that the rights of the Ahmadiyyas were less important, because they were less numerous.

But the Chair of Plenary session, Professor Werner Menski had no difficulty in maintaining order and in fact allowed the High Commissioner additional time to compensate for the interruptions.

There was a disturbance in the afternoon Plenary Session when the second of the two Government speakers, Advocate Khondker Mahbubuddin Ahmed MP refused to accept the ruling of the Chair, Lord Dholakia, that his time was up. All the Speakers were strictly limited to ten minutes but the Chair had allowed Mr. Ahmed an

additional five minutes.

The High Commissioner had been alerted in writing on three occasions that a list of five persons named by him were invited to attend the Conference but he brought along an additional five, and together they shouted and protested the ruling of the Chair as Mr. Ahmed sought to continue his speech. Some people in the audience shouted back. The High Commissioner and his party then withdrew.

Professor Mable Gomes was one of the five people invited at the request of the High Commissioner and although she had asked questions in the morning Plenary and participated actively till then, she also left with him, forfeiting opportunity to participate in the afternoon workshops.

It is clear to me, from the High Commissioner's determination to bring in extra people who were not invited, and from the conduct of his group when they refused to accept the Chair's ruling, that their object was not to contribute to the discussion of the unacceptable human rights situation in Bangladesh but to sabotage the initiative if possible, and if not, to creating disorder by wilfully choosing not to comply with universally accepted rules of debate.

End

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow rectangular background. The signature reads "Eric Avebury" in a cursive script.

Lord Avebury House of Lords  
London SW1A 0AA Tel 020 7219 3438

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**Question\_to\_cabinet\_ministers\_of\_the\_Swedish\_parliame  
2005.06.20**

To Cabinet  
Minister Carin  
Jämtin

THE FREEDOM  
OF RELIGION  
IN  
BANGLADESH

The Human Rights Watch (HRW) recently presented a report which in detail describes the increasing acts of violence against the Muslim Ahmadiya sect in Bangladesh. In January this year the government banned publications by the Ahmadiya sect.

The Ahmadiya sect is very vulnerable as its variant of Islam is considered blaspheming against the dominating Sunni-approach in Bangladesh. The situation has become aggravated since radical Islamic groups have gained increased legitimacy as a support party to the government.

Persecution of  
other religious

minorities in Bangladesh is occurring, e.g. of Hindus who have extensively been forced to flee from the country. The development is especially tragic as Bangladesh was founded on secular principles and has considerable experience of democratic elections.

HRW has encouraged the international community to demand the following of Bangladesh: withdraw the ban on publications by Ahmadiyas prosecute those accountable for attacks on politicians in opposition and on minorities immediately give U.N.'s reporter on religious freedom, Asma Jahangir, admittance to the country.

What measures will you, Cabinet Minister, take in order to actively counteract the



persecution and  
discrimination of

religious  
minorities in  
Bangladesh?

Cecilia  
Wikström (The  
Liberal Party)  
Bench number  
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## **House\_of\_Lords\_debate\_on\_Bangladesh**

### **23 June, 2005**

1.37 pm

Lord Avebury rose to call attention to the level of political and religious violence in Bangladesh; and to move for Papers.

The noble Lord said: My Lords, human rights in Bangladesh have not been high of the agenda of the media or the public in this country, in spite of the close historical, sporting and cultural ties between our two countries. The Economist observed last week that the problem was, "among the most sparsely covered by the international press".

It explained that that was partly because the Government there made it hard for international journalists to visit and partly because, when they did visit, the Government did not like what they wrote—in particular, the recent suggestions that the country was seeing a rise in Islamic extremism and was becoming a haven for international terrorists.

The biggest headache for western diplomats in Dhaka, the Economist says, is whether democracy can survive and whether the elections scheduled for 2006 will be held. The main opposition party, the Awami League, threatens to boycott the polls, in the face of a rising tide of violence against its leaders and supporters.

The Home Office was forced to take Bangladesh off the so-called white list of supposedly safe countries to which asylum seekers could be returned without the right of an in-country appeal when the High Court ruled in February, after an exhaustive survey of the evidence, that no rational decision-maker could have been satisfied that there was in general in Bangladesh no serious risk of persecution. The FCO's latest human rights report describes Bangladesh as the second most dangerous country in the world in which to be a journalist. Even at a distance, one can see that reflected in the paranoia of the reaction to an attempt to hold a rational discussion of the rise of extremism, intolerance and violence, particularly as they affect religious, ethnic and political minorities, as well as secular and progressive groups. Last Friday, a steering

committee under my chairmanship convened a one-day meeting at SOAS to discuss the matters. We understood that the high commission had protested to the Foreign Office about the holding of such a meeting. The noble Lord may be able to assure us that it was told that, in this country, the Government have nothing to say about

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any lawful discussions, including those concerned with human rights. Just for the record, we invited the high commissioner and four other people representing the Bangladesh Government to participate. We gave them two 10-minute slots in the plenary session compared with only one for all other groups, including the official opposition.

The High Commissioner was heckled when he said that there was no violation of human rights in Bangladesh; that many MPs belonging to the main party now in government—the BNP—were assassinated during the 1996–2001 Awami League terms of office; and that the rise of Ahmadiyya Muslims was not so important because there were only a small number of them compared with the majority Sunni population. But, in spite of those provocative remarks, order was maintained by the chair and the high commissioner was allowed extra time to compensate for the interruptions.

When the second government speaker in turn exceeded his allotted 10 minutes and refused to obey the chair's ruling that he should sit down, the high commissioner and his group—twice as many as the number that we had officially invited and in spite of being told in writing three times that we could not accept the additional nominations because of the limited capacity of the hall—created a disturbance and then walked out. He subsequently issued a false statement claiming that the meeting had broken up in disarray, when, in fact, it continued peacefully until 18:00 hours as scheduled.

By walking out, the high commissioner's group forfeited the chance to participate in the afternoon workshops, which were very useful in focusing on particular aspects of the problem; namely, human rights in general, the persecution of minorities; the rise of religious extremism and the threat to secular democracy; and international aspects, including the role of donors and international NGOs.

I believe that this was the first time that an attempt had been made to look at the situation of all of the

besieged minority groups together and, if possible, to point to ways of halting the downward slide to anarchy, lawlessness and repression. The participants all agreed, apart from the Bangladesh officials, that it was an outstanding success. They were enthusiastic about setting up a network that will continue the work of the conference, as I hope Ministers will have seen from the resolution, a copy of which was sent to them.

We would have liked to hear from the two official spokesmen how they saw the key governance challenges that they face and how best outside assistance could help to address them. That was the subject of a meeting held last February in Washington between members of the donor community, including the UK, US, EU, World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Since then, I know that the UK and the European Union have raised further concerns with Dhaka. Unfortunately, it was as if none of those had registered with them.

The British high commissioner in Dhaka only a few weeks ago expressed concern over the lack of progress in the investigation of an attempt on his life, in which three people died, and over the continuation of similar attacks. He mentioned the increased aid that the UK is giving for

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police reform, which is part of a package that makes us the biggest donors—larger even than the World Bank. Will the Minister say whether, as Mr Choudury suggested, aid can be deployed effectively to improve the law and order situation in the absence of much firmer leadership from the Government, in a situation where we have, as one participant describes it, "the politicisation of the Civil Service, undermining of the judiciary and utilisation of the security forces to promote narrow party interests"?

The UK has repeatedly pressed Bangladesh to investigate terrorist crimes and to bring those responsible to justice. The dreadful murder of Shah A M S Kibria, the distinguished former Minister and ambassador to the UN, and the failure of the authorities to take the steps that might have saved his life, was only the latest in a series of outrages, which included attempts on the lives of the Leader of the Opposition in August 2004 and, of course, on our high commissioner earlier in that year.

The Bangladesh high commissioner did not mention the belated request that I understand has been made by

his Government to Interpol and the FBI for help in tracking down "terrorists sheltered by a foreign intelligence agency" allegedly responsible for the killing of 21 people in the attack on the Leader of the Opposition's rally last August or the improper release of confessions said to have been made by two people held in custody for those offences, although neither of them have been taken to court. Some of us saw those moves, and the orders issued to law enforcers to strengthen their efforts to arrest known terrorists, as preliminary results of the conference. Can the noble Baroness in her reply say whether we have received any requests for help in the detection of those crimes? If so, what reply have we made?

Even if they convict a few terrorists, that will not deal with the larger penumbra of religious and communal hatred which has inspired attacks on secular organisations, such as the Grameen Bank and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, which have made significant contributions in the past towards the country's development, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community's mosques and members, and places of worship belonging to the Hindu, Christian and Buddhist communities.

In some of those attacks the police actively collaborated with the bigots. I hope that the training we provide for the police will help them to enforce the law more impartially. But what can we do as presidency of the EU from next week to raise the pressure on Dhaka, not just to end terrorist atrocities and improve the performance and behaviour of the police, but to stamp out the hatemongers who create the climate in which the terrorists thrive?

The UN Rapporteur on Religious Freedom reported to the Human Rights Commission in March on the killing of an Ahmadiyya Imam, a Hindu priest and a Buddhist monk, as well as other sectarian outrages and threats. The Government's response has been merely to reiterate that freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution while, at the same time, they have banned publications by the Ahmadiyya Muslim community.

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The Government have indeed banned two extremist bodies, but not the International Khatme Nabuwat Movement Bangladesh, whose members incite to violence against the Ahmadis, as we saw in a terrifying video that was shown at the conference on Friday. There is no law in Bangladesh forbidding

incitement to religious hatred. If there is a law against incitement to commit other substantive criminal offences, it is not enforced against religious fanatics. An informer from another extremist group—the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh—told the police that that group was engaged in a systematic campaign against cultural activities considered to be non-Islamic.

Former Minister, Professor Abu Sayed, claims that camps have been established in Bangladesh for the training of thousands of militants, with the assistance of coalition partner, Jamaat-e-Islami, and that these groups were infiltrating public departments and civil society with the aim of launching an Islamist revolution. He is not the only person to have made those allegations. But the response of the police is not to investigate those charges, but to raid the professor's house and to confiscate books on the rise of communism and extremism.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Executions said that he has received no substantive response to the three communications sent to the Bangladesh Government about killings by the rapid action battalion. Representations by Amnesty International have also fallen on deaf ears. Amnesty International says that the RAB killed 147 people in 2004. It talks about a growing tide of violence on members of the Opposition and on public places such as cinemas.

Our conference heard from representatives of the indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts where the 1997 peace accords have not been implemented as the CHT ministry has now publicly acknowledged. The people are steadily being deprived of the ancestral lands which have belonged to the Jumma people from time immemorial. The very demography of the CHT is being changed under military occupation. The commission set up to resolve land disputes has never been activated. The attacks on tribal people in 2003, which involved killings, rapes and the burning of hundreds of homes, have not been properly investigated, like all of the preceding atrocities over many years.

Violence against the press is on the rise. The US ambassador says that journalism is the most dangerous profession in Bangladesh. In the past 12 months, more than 400 journalists have received death threats, 320 have been tortured and five have been murdered, including Mr Golam Mahfuz, deputy editor of a daily paper, who was stabbed to death less than a month ago. The editor and publisher of a former weekly

tabloid were charged with sedition and the publisher spent 17 months behind bars before he was given bail. Apart from the perilous situation of the religious and ethnic minorities, violence against women and children in Bangladesh has reached an unacceptable level and the court system is stacked against the victims, as the Daily Star of Dhaka noted last Sunday. The Government do not enforce laws prohibiting discrimination against

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women, minority groups and people with disabilities. Bangladesh is an increasingly dangerous and threatening place for them as well as those belonging to minority faiths, ethnic groups, opposition parties and secular organisations.

At the root of all those problems lies the cancer of extremism. Bangladesh is at the front line of the war against terrorism fuelled by a maverick branch of Islam that aims to transform the country into a Taliban-style dictatorship. But instead of acknowledging the threat to the country's stability and acting vigorously against the peddlers of hatred and violence, the government pretend that nothing is wrong. They have colluded with extremist groups and failed to defend the rights of vulnerable people, in spite of repeated pleas by the Foreign Office, the US State Department, the European Union and the agencies of the Human Rights Commission. They have managed to keep a relatively low profile in Europe, compared with other hotspots in the world, in spite of the danger that such bigotry and hatred, if allowed to fester in Bangladesh, could spread outwards from the sub-continent to the rest of the world including Britain.

The British Government and the people of this country must support embattled minorities and human rights defenders, and build solidarity in the struggle to preserve their vanishing freedoms. We must fashion a coalition for liberty that spans all people under threat and their allies throughout the world. I beg to move for Papers.

1.51 pm

Baroness Uddin: My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, for bringing Bangladesh to the attention of the House. From the outset we have been well briefed on the debate. I thank all sections of the community that have provided us with extensive

information. I shall make no apology for borrowing some of their comments, so I ask noble Lords not to cry foul.

I also thank the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, for detailing some of the issues. To a certain extent, like other noble Lords, I shall merely add to his remarks. On a lighter note—if that is possible given the subject of the debate—I congratulate the Bangladesh cricket team on defeating Australia. I am glad that England also did very well at Trent Bridge on Tuesday. As always, I have two perspectives on this debate, which I shall come to shortly. Most of our household supported England while my husband and I hung by a thread in support of Bangladesh, so I am glad that they did not let us down. There lies the dilemma in taking part in this debate. I do not recall the previous debate in this House on Bangladesh, to which the noble Lord referred. As noble Lords may be aware, although Britain has been my home for more than 30 years, I was born in Bangladesh. I have regarded it as sufficiently important to spend all my spare time there and to encourage my children to visit whenever my purse allowed.

I confess that, apart from a deep sense of family belonging, I have avoided, at all costs, becoming embroiled in the goings-on in Bangladesh. That is not to say that I do not acknowledge that what happens there deeply affects the Bangladeshi community in the UK, in which I am totally submerged.

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I came here as a 13 year-old, just after the civil war, when Bangladesh was led to victory under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who is respected as the father of the nation. Much of my resilience, tenacity and ideals come from having witnessed the torture, rape, killings and utter destruction of that conflict. The knowledge that oppression, however miniscule, is totally unacceptable drove me to become engaged in fighting against prejudice and bigotry in Tower Hamlets and elsewhere.

My contribution today comes from a deep love for my birthplace, wanting it to do well at all costs. The way in which Bangladesh has been seen this week within the Westminster village—with the historic defeat of Australia, a meeting held in the House by the Hindu Council on the treatment of that minority group, the conference chaired by the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, on human rights and the rise of violence, and now this



debate—has come as a mixed blessing.

For many seeking international attention on Bangladesh, these opportunities are an invaluable way of acknowledging the amazing progress that it has made in its relatively short existence. Bangladesh has a lot going for it, for which all political parties can take credit: continuing democracy and Bangladesh's steady economic growth of more than 5 per cent. The struggle for freedom and democracy in Bangladesh achieved a hard-won multi-party system of political representation in 1991. There have been elections and a peaceful transfer of power between political parties twice since then.

Bangladesh has come a long way since its birth in 1971. Despite the countless lashings of Mother Earth and all the difficulties associated with civil war and climate change, the country has become self-sufficient in food provision. It has dramatically cut its population growth rate and increased access to education, particularly for girls. That is remarkable by any stretch of the imagination. Bangladesh is rightly proud that it is no longer dependent on international aid, and the micro-credit success stories have been acclaimed and acknowledged internationally.

The life expectancy of men and women has increased, and education and economic opportunities have expanded for Bangladeshi citizens. NGOs are encouraged, by and large, to play an important role, particularly in the empowerment of women.

Bangladesh should also be rightly proud of its history of a free and active press. I acknowledge the contribution of the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, on the FCO's comment, which is deeply worrying for everyone.

On the international stage, Bangladesh is the second largest contributor of troops to UN peacekeeping forces. It has demonstrated a strong commitment to international peace and security through the deployment of more than 8,000 peacekeepers worldwide. They enjoy a well-earned reputation for discipline and effectiveness. Those are huge national achievements; they are the achievements of all Bangladeshi people.

Throughout, of course, Britain has stood shoulder to shoulder with Bangladesh. That friendship and understanding is centuries old, with Britain and

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Bangladesh working together in politics and trade, as well as cultural and countless social interchanges. We

remain the largest single investor in Bangladesh, with more than 50 UK companies doing business there. The UK is at the forefront of Bangladesh's efforts to help to combat poverty and meet the millennium development goals. It contributed £29 million to provide flood relief last year.

The attack in Sylhet on our High Commissioner, Anwar Choudhury, in May last year was absolutely shocking, and the subsequent attacks on the mayor in Sylhet, in August; on the Awami League and the opposition leader, on 21 August, with the subsequent death of a prominent female leader, Ivy Rahman; and, as the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, mentioned, on a well-respected UN ambassador and former Bangladeshi finance minister, have rightly led to widespread international condemnation and concern. The perpetrators remain at large, which has propelled an outcry in both Bangladesh and the international community. I hope that the Government of Bangladesh will want to do more than provide assurances that those attacks are being taken seriously and that they will be dealt with using the full force of the law.

No one, most of all the perpetrators of such crimes, should be left in any doubt that violence of such a magnitude will not be tolerated in a democratic country, albeit a young one. So the statistics compiled by various human rights organisations on human rights abuse allegations in Bangladesh make for very grim reading. Bangladesh is rightly judged alongside all other countries according to how it treats the most vulnerable in society. It too must be treated equally. I hope that there is consensus that, without respect for universal human rights, there is no potential for democracy to grow.

As I was growing up in this country, I believed that there was a clear demarcation between right and wrong—perhaps I was seeing it through the tinted vision of youth—but, in my latter age, the global context has shifted and, however much we dislike it, there are several indications that there is no parity of treatment on the issue of human rights abuse. It seems to be applied in different contexts and according to different standards of behaviour. There is a perception in Palestine and elsewhere that we have allowed a free-fall in standards while overstraining our sense of justice to accommodate those who are regarded as "friends". We have to have an internationally agreed basic human rights principle and an understanding that freedom of speech and a right to religious expression are fundamental to all of us.

In this regard, as has already been said, I know that there is rising concern about the level of continuing violence in Bangladesh—not least because there is a wide-ranging consensus on the fragile law and order situation, which has meant that the implementation of the rule of law, particularly by the special forces known as RAB, is counter to good practice. Good governance has to be practised at all levels in order to create confidence in the communities and internationally. From that point of view, whether it is

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from the policeman on the street, from the local district administrator or from the top levels of government and the judiciary, we require assurances. While RAB is regarded as being present by popular demand, it perhaps demonstrates that the country's force of law is not able to function properly in the usual way.

It has been reported that the British High Commissioner in Bangladesh commented recently that he hoped that, if apprehended, the perpetrator of the grenade attack on him in Sylhet would not be killed in cross-fire. There is deep concern that cross-fire is one of the tactics used by RAB, for which it has become well known.

These debates are taking place in the context that we now live in a global world and are no longer able to be comforted that what we do in our own country is our own business. I add here a caution that those who live in glass houses should not throw stones. Globalisation is rapidly transforming the way in which we live and strong governance, a respect for human rights and law and order are prerequisites for development and growth. We have become world citizens. I hope that everyone involved in the welfare of Bangladesh will accept that debate in the public arena is a positive and that there is no need to be defensive when things are not as they should be.

One of the primary reasons for the lack of progress in many arenas of Bangladesh is that the two main parties remain at loggerheads, thereby leaving Parliament in limbo and people in doubt about the seriousness of the commitment to continue building democracy. They have nothing to look forward to in the way of role models.

I hope that there is consensus that international concerns about the shape of the political landscape in Bangladesh should lead to some re-jigging in the light of what has become apparent, and that the Bangladesh

Government will recognise that this is having an adverse effect on the perception of Bangladesh internationally, notwithstanding its tremendous economic and social success.

As has been said, the next election in Bangladesh will be a key challenge. I hope that the political parties can begin to move away from hostile confrontation to a spirit of accommodation, agree basic standards of conduct and abide by them. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what role the UK may play in facilitating this.

Democratic principles cannot be enforced or made hostage to party politics and personal gain. Surely it is no comfort to the Bangladesh Government that they are continually regarded as a corrupt force. They now have the added baggage of having to defend their actions on human rights violations, particularly against other religious minorities, as well as the accusation that they are harbouring extreme activities among their own.

I should like to see the Bangladesh Government make it apparent to the world outside that they are seriously concerned about the numerous allegations of violent incidents and abuses taking place against the minority. I hope they will invite a parliamentary group to visit at the

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earliest opportunity. Opening the doors to a greater understanding and the reality on the ground may go a long way towards giving some answers.

If left unanswered, these concerns and allegations of corruption and abuse will tarnish the international reputation of Bangladesh and discourage further inward investment, thereby damaging the prospects for long-term prosperity and making ordinary people suffer.

As the next election looms nearer it is important for Bangladesh to ensure that every step necessary is in place to demonstrate that it can earn the confidence of the world community. No matter how much each of us thinks that what we do is our business, that we can cushion our existence and take comfort from the fact that even the UK and the USA are under scrutiny for their human rights records, there should be no place to hide if we are to live together.

Bangladesh faces a thousand challenges—all of those to which I have referred and, perhaps, impending water shortages, huge floods, global warming and arsenic poisoning. These should be matters for

discussion and attention. I hope that we will not neglect them in the future.

As a member of the All-Party Group on Bangladesh, I hope that we will take note of the debate today, perhaps forge some links with other Members and work through some of the resolutions put forward by the conference. I also hope that the Minister will look at the resolutions and consider how best to work with the Bangladesh Government to ensure that they are open and transparent when discussing difficult issues such as human rights violations.

Perhaps I may borrow a quote made by the UN Secretary-General earlier this month. It might not be totally appropriate but, nevertheless, it shows us where we are. He said:

"Because of globalisation we live in a world of interconnected threats and mutual vulnerability between rich and poor and weak and strong. No country can afford to deal with today's threats alone and no threat can be dealt with effectively unless other threats are addressed at the same time".

So, as a daughter of Bangladesh, I ask that we—as friends of the Bangladesh Government and as partners in adversity—promise to work together with mutual respect while, at the same time, explicitly stating that human rights abuse, however small, is the business of all of us. Let us promise that we will not allow Bangladesh or any other country—especially those we regard as friends—to get on with it by themselves.

2.7 pm

The Lord Bishop of Coventry: My Lords, I begin by commiserating with the noble Baroness, Lady Uddin, who cannot read her own handwriting. I suspect that I speak for many in your Lordships' House when I say that I cannot read mine either, with or without glasses.

It takes a certain temerity for a white Anglo-Saxon who has never visited Bangladesh to take part in a debate such as this. I justify it, perhaps, by reminding your Lordships that the City of Coventry, where I live and where I am privileged to serve, has a significant

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Bangladesh community. This community has given rise to a number of restaurants, which are generically referred to as "Indian" restaurants, where they serve what is generically referred to as "curry". This is one of the huge advantages that we have in Coventry. In passing, I would point out that the curry in Coventry is

just as good as that in Birmingham or Leicester, and second only perhaps to that in Bradford.

When I welcomed two new colleagues to my staff team last week I decided that we would take them out to a meal in a local curry house. Halfway through the meal the manager of the restaurant came up to me and began to tell me the story of his family in Bangladesh. It appears that they are part of the Ahmadi community. As he told the story his eyes filled with tears and he asked me, an Anglican bishop, to pray for him and his family. What I wish to say today is to some extent focused on that community.

The Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh is small. Its numbers are estimated at around 100,000 out of a population of some 140 million. As we have already heard, many respected international monitors point to increasing evidence of an orchestrated campaign on the part of Islamist extremists against this small minority. We are hearing stories of mob violence, including attempts to occupy Ahmadi places of worship. Several homes have been destroyed and Ahmadi converts, it is said, are being detained against their will and pressured to recant. The reason for this seems, at one level, quite simple. These people are held to be at best unorthodox in their beliefs and at worst heretical.

What concerns us today is not merely the attacks on a heterodox Muslim sect in Bangladesh. These are a presenting issue for something profoundly more worrying. We are speaking about attacks on one of the foundations of justice and peace in our world; namely, the right to religious freedom. These attacks are all the more sinister because they appear to be tolerated or even encouraged by the state. Last week the Human Rights Watch accused the supposedly secular government of Bangladesh of being complicit in religious violence. I quote from its report:

"This is a dangerous moment . . . the authorities have emboldened extremists by failing to prosecute those involved in anti-Ahmadi violence and by banning Ahmadiyya publications".

All this may sound remote and perhaps of little interest to most of us in the West—that is, until we remember that one of the major pilgrimage centres for this community is in rural Surrey, where 30,000 people gather each summer. So the geographical links to this persecuted minority are not so distant as we might at first think. By all accounts, the largest mosque in western Europe belongs to this community, and is to be found in Morden.

What should concern us more than geographical

proximity is the issue of the state-sponsored oppression of a religious minority. If the violence and intimidation against one small community in Bangladesh is tolerated, whose place of worship or home will next be burned; who will next be beaten? There are already signs that other minority religious groups such as Hindus are beginning to suffer the same kind of violence.

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Precisely because we may be tempted to think of this as an obscure persecution in a far away place, we must redouble our efforts to be intolerant of intolerance. For some, the persecutions of the marsh Arabs in Iraq, or of Christians in Pakistan, or the spiral of violence unleashed in the Great Lakes region, were once similarly obscure and far away.

I speak as a Christian, but most emphatically not with any sense of moral superiority. I am only too conscious that the Church in this land has in the past engaged in heresy trials which, in their turn, led to institutional violence. Those burnt at the stake or disembowelled for their faith are now generally held by both sides to have been honourable martyrs. We have, thank God, learnt that there is far more that unites us than divides us; but, even more significantly, that our common humanity is a God-given privilege that we despise at our peril.

Equally, I am not insensitive to issues of doctrinal soundness or orthodoxy. I accept that the Muslim community world wide, both Sunna and Shia, finds abhorrent the idea that a late-19th century prophet should be thought to have superseded the prophet Mohammed as the ultimate messenger of divine truth. For Christians, a parallel might be the arrival of the Mormons, at about the same time, claiming that their holy book somehow trumps the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Such claims to authority can all too easily divide communities, setting erstwhile friends and neighbours against each other in vicious and violent ways.

The question we all need to ask, whatever our religious affiliation, is whether violence in the name of God can ever be justified. That very question has formed the basis of some very fruitful dialogue in recent years. It gave rise to the Alexandria Declaration in 2001. That was signed by top religious leaders from the Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities in Israel/Palestine, a process in which the diocese of Coventry was privileged to play a significant part. It

led, in turn, to the Baghdad Religious Accord signed on 24 February 2004, in the preface of which the following statement is to be found: "According to our faith traditions"—

this refers to Sunna and Shia Muslims, Christians and Kurds—

"killing innocents in the name of God is a desecration of the laws of heaven and defames religion not only in Iraq but in the world".

As ever, words alone are not enough, but I humbly suggest that such an approach is not without merit and might usefully be adapted to other situations, such as that under discussion today.

I realise, of course, that much so-called religious persecution also has economic, ethnic and political elements. Indeed, power struggles come in many different guises. That may well be the case in Bangladesh, and I would welcome any insights that other noble Lords might have to offer, since such territory is certainly beyond my competence to comment on.

In concluding, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, for initiating today's debate. I urge Her Majesty's Government to do all they can to bring pressure on the government of Bangladesh to ensure that basic human rights are observed and that freedom of religious thought and practice is not only tolerated but welcomed.

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2.16 pm

The Earl of Sandwich: My Lords, the noble Baroness, Lady Uddin, mentioned cricket. The expression on Mohammad Ashraful's face after he had scored his century and Bangladesh had beaten Australia by five wickets in Cardiff last weekend spoke for itself. So did the slogan on his T-shirt, which said "Grameen Phones". A great country, which has always unfairly been seen as a poor relation, first of western Bengal, then of India, then of Pakistan, has now excelled at the highest level of sport and boasts one of the most famous and successful examples of rural development anywhere.

The Grameen Bank has become a symbol of micro-enterprise world wide, demonstrating how the very poorest communities can support themselves through their own efforts, and how a commercial bank can benefit from low rates of interest and exceptionally high rates of repayment. The poorest, in other words,



are shown to be the most financially efficient.

I saw this over many years when I visited eastern India and Bangladesh several times for organisations such as Christian Aid and CARE. I met the leaders of local NGOs such as BRAC, GK, Nijera Kori and Gono Unnayan Prochesta, which all have an excellent reputation in the aid world. I know that the DfID is involved with BRAC today in a major rural education programme.

Apart from their business enterprise, I admired the vitality and skills of all the Bangladeshis I met. I saw health workers visiting the poorest families, craftsmen making artificial limbs and spare parts in an industrial workshop, labourers at night school, small farmers and their wives transplanting rice and fishing in ponds. I became nervous riding behind paramedics on their mopeds along slippery dykes, then impatient waiting for a delayed, crowded ferry to carry me across some of the widest rivers in the world.

The people have endured much, and the many stories of survival and tragedy in successive disastrous floods still haunt anyone who has worked in Bangladesh, let alone lived there. It can be a dangerous place to live, as we have heard.

Bengalis, east and west, are a highly intelligent, artistic and articulate people, and their strong opinions, while they often enliven democratic debate, sadly sometimes spill over into factional and sectarian violence. The noble Lord, Lord Avebury, has already spoken of the dangers to journalists, the threats to democracy, the human rights abuse and the fault lines between the many political parties and ethnic and religious groups.

I also learnt that political violence can be at its fiercest at a local level, where the more progressive reforming elements clash with vested interests and local landlords. For example, I visited a clinic where a paramedic had been beheaded for asking too many questions about the causes of poverty.

But I also remember some remarkable individuals who have helped to build this nation, such as Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury—to mention just one. He was a young medic who, having fought in the independence war, started a people's health centre

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called the Gonoshasthaya Kendra in a rural area outside Dakar. This health centre was remarkable in itself, training young paramedics in the "where there is no doctor" techniques, but he soon became aware of

the political background and the power of the multinational drug companies, which were pricing products way out of reach of the rural poor. With some help from German and British charities, he built a drugs factory alongside his health centre to manufacture only the basic medicines on the WHO list, thereby undercutting the big pharmaceutical companies. Deservedly, he went on to enter politics and became for a time health minister. He was a man of extraordinary dedication and humanity.

I mention these things because this has always been a nation of great fascination to me and a country of tremendous potential, character and colour. Yet it is also a country of great vulnerability because of its geographical position and its political weaknesses. It is resilient in dealing with successive natural disasters and very far from the basket case that is sometimes portrayed in the media.

I should also mention that we in London are fortunate to have such a thriving Bangladeshi community, not to mention the curry, referred to by the right reverend Prelate, which brings this lively culture into the midst of our own.

I was pleased to hear reference made to the Chittagong Hill Tracts. I would like to mention two minority groups in particular, the Biharis and the Rohingyas. The Biharis are in some ways the equivalent of Palestinians in south Asia. They are victims of racism, religious intolerance and a collapsed empire. Their story is long and complicated. Most of them are descendants of Urdu-speaking Muslim refugees who came to east Pakistan after partition in 1947. Before that, thousands of them were transported from Bihar by the British to build railways and support the administration in east Bengal. In the Bangladesh war of independence, the Biharis sided with Pakistan and have since been understandably resented. Few have been given citizenship, although a High Court ruling two years ago found in favour of one group. The Tripartite Agreement of 1974, which followed the independence war between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, failed to resolve the problem of the Biharis. More than 30 years later, about 300,000 still live in about 70 camps, in wretched, crowded conditions with inadequate healthcare. They are unrecognised even by the UN as genuine refugees as laid down by the convention.

As noble Lords will know, the case of the Biharis has at various times been brought up in this Parliament, notably by the late Lord Ennals, who achieved the only conference on the Biharis in Geneva, and by Ben

Whitaker through the Minority Rights group and others. Repatriation to Pakistan was discussed, but, as so often, meeting humanitarian need through the UN was the only practical outcome. However, Britain seems to have lost any sense of responsibility that it once had. In her reply to the noble Lord, Lord McNally, on 22 May last year, the Leader

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of the House said that while DfiD's third largest aid programme was in Bangladesh, there was no special support for the Biharis through it. This year's departmental report, which has just been published, makes no mention of them, although I understand that some funding may have become available through the human rights and governance fund. What assistance are Her Majesty's Government giving to the Biharis? Some Members of this House have been involved with the Dakar Initiative, which aims to carry out a comprehensive needs assessment of the Biharis in the camps. Apparently, this project was offered to Her Majesty's Government, but nothing more has been heard of it. Will the Government undertake to make inquiries and, if possible, follow up this very worthwhile initiative as well?

I should also like to bring up the case of the Rohingya, who are a Muslim minority in northern Arakan State in Burma. Here I speak as a council member of Anti-Slavery International. The Rohingya people suffer discrimination in Burma on the basis of their ethnicity and religion and, in Bangladesh, they are unwanted refugees. In Burma, the Citizenship Law of 1982 renders them stateless and their freedom of movement is highly restricted. They are routinely subjected to forced labour, extortion and arbitrary arrest. Human rights abuses in Burma, which are the subject of attention in the media today, have led to mass exoduses and a continuous influx of Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh. I understand that 20,000 refugees remain in two precarious refugee camps where the literacy rate is only 12 per cent and chronic malnutrition peaks sometimes at 65 per cent. Last September, the Bangladesh Government formally rejected a UNHCR proposal for self-reliance for these camps. Several incidents took place in Kutupalong camp, starting with a hunger strike in June 2004 and culminating in a violent police raid on 18 November, leaving three refugees dead and 42, including six women, imprisoned on what I understand were fabricated charges.

Rohingya refugees continue to face intimidation, pressure to sign voluntary repatriation forms and serious abuses in the camps. In addition, the two remaining international NGOs were compelled to withdraw from the camps in the past two years. This raises concerns about the protection of, as well as the quality of humanitarian assistance to, the refugees. In Anti-Slavery International's submission to the UN Commission on Human Rights on 15 April, it urged Burma to end its policies of discrimination against the Rohingya and to repeal the 1982 Citizenship Law. It also urged Bangladesh to cease all coercion and harassment of Rohingya refugees, to conduct an independent investigation into the November killings, and fully to implement the recommendations of the joint assessment mission that was carried out by the UNHCR and the World Food Programme last October.

The noble Lord, Lord Avebury, spoke of building solidarity. May I urge our Government to do their utmost to work with the international community to find durable solutions for both the Bihari community and the Rohingya refugees, instead of simply abandoning them?

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2.28 pm

Lord Dholakia: My Lords, I thank my noble friend Lord Avebury for this debate. He has a distinguished record of addressing human rights issues, and he has been fearless in his critique of regimes which abuse the rights and liberties of individuals. I am aware that many people are alive today because of the intervention of my noble friend Lord Avebury on their behalf. I have travelled to many countries, but have always found that my noble friend has been there before me. He has a deep knowledge of the issues that we are debating and the Government should take very serious note of what he had to say.

Perhaps I may also put on record my thanks for the very balanced contribution of the noble Baroness, Lady Uddin. She identified the issues of concern, but she also mentioned the progress that the nation of Bangladesh is making. More importantly, her stand on human rights issues is most welcome. We should be equally grateful to the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Coventry and the noble Earl, Lord Sandwich, for their contributions.

Bangladesh has had a difficult birth. It was originally

a part of Pakistan, but those two states are now separated by 1,000 miles at the two extremes of the Indian sub-continent. Bangladesh's struggle to become an independent nation was undeniable—and that is precisely what happened. I do not believe that it is necessary to dwell on history, but suffice to say that the dreams of an effective democracy in Bangladesh have not been fully realised. I had the opportunity to meet Sheikh Mujibar Rahman when he was released from prison in Pakistan and flew to London. He was a man of great stature, who was determined that Bangladesh, with its unique culture, would pull itself from the turmoil of the struggle for independence and build a nation in which the rule of law would prevail. I love Bangladesh and have many friends there, and I was deeply touched when I was invited to chair the afternoon session of the European human rights conference on Bangladesh, held last Friday at the University of London, in which my noble friend Lord Avebury participated. It was not an easy job; emotions were running high; and it did not help when people in authority denied that there was any violation of human rights there. As I have always said, if there are issues we should not be squeamish about them but should take the necessary action. With all the evidence available and documented, it was difficult to accept the statements made by some of the officers. Despite all that, it was a good conference with ample opportunity for a constructive approach to problems in Bangladesh.

But I have another worry. There is a large law-abiding Bangladeshi community here. They have struggled hard to build an economic base and contribute substantially to the revenue in this country. They were the last people involved in large-scale migration to the United Kingdom, and despite adversity they have come out well. They also have close relations in Bangladesh, so we should be mindful

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that what happens in Bangladesh has repercussions in the Bangladeshi community here. We ignore that at our peril.

So what are the issues that concern us all? I have studied mountains of documents, and there are matters that need addressing. Briefly, they fall under the following categories: the prosecution of religious minorities, as the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Coventry, said; extra-judicial executions and custodial deaths; attacks on the media, educational institutions

and students; violence against women; allegations of political assassinations; political persecution and torture; evidence of terrorism and growing extremism; and the security and safety of citizens.

I deplore human rights abuses arising anywhere in the world, because as part of the global community what happens in one part of the world has an impact on all of us.

I turn now to the plight of the minorities in Bangladesh. In a Written Answer to my noble friend Lord Avebury, the noble Baroness, Lady Symons of Vernham Dean, replied:

"We are concerned about the increasing level of political and extremist violence in Bangladesh and the dangers this holds for Bangladesh. We raise these concerns and the need for effective action to ensure that those responsible are brought to justice on a regular basis with the Bangladeshi authorities and will continue to do so".—[Official Report, 7/3/05; col. WA56.]

In a Written Answer to a Question by Jeremy Corbyn in the other place, the Minister, Mr Alexander, replied:

"We have serious concerns about the security and law and order situation in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi Government need to take effective action to bring those responsible for violence to justice".

Mr Alexander added:

"The large majority of recent attacks have been directed at political and civil society rather than against British or other foreign nationals".—[Official Report, Commons, 4/3/05; col. 1441W.]

Again, in answer to another Question from Mr Drew on 8 February this year, Mr Alexander replied:

"We continue to be concerned about the situation of religious minorities, including Hindus and Christians, in Bangladesh. I raised these concerns with the Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia, on 21 December during a visit to Dhaka. We regularly raise issues of religious persecution and intolerance with the Bangladesh authorities, both bilaterally and with EU colleagues. We urge them to ensure minorities are suitably protected, that all incidents are promptly and fully investigated, that the perpetrators of crimes against religious minorities are brought to justice and that firm action is taken against incitement".—[Official Report, Commons, 8/2/05; col. 1453W.]

So what are these allegations? Let us examine the situation in the context of Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and the Ahmadiyya communities. Religious persecution is having a devastating effect on their

freedom to practise their faith. It is damaging their culture, and there are numerous examples of families uprooting themselves from their place of birth. You simply have to look at the exodus from Bangladesh. The Amnesty International report dated 1 December 2001 is quite explicit on the subject. It says: "The killing of a prominent member of the Hindu community appears to be connected to the current wave of attacks on Hindus. On 16 November, Gopal Krishna Muhri, principle of Nazirhat

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College in Chittagong, was shot dead at his home. The circumstances surrounding his killing point to the strong possibility that he was targeted because of his identity as a prominent Hindu with a successful career in the educational establishment of Chittagong city". There is a continuous flow of refugees who have been forced to leave their homes and property as a direct result of the discrimination and persecution to which they are subjected. There is also evidence of looting, arson and murder aimed at that minority. Even more disturbing is the plight of women, who are victims of sexual violence—or rape, gang rape and mass rape. We all know that sexual violence affects not only the victim but the whole family and in many cases the whole community. I shall resist the temptation to cite reports from some eminent and independent foreign journalists and the serious concerns expressed by international human rights organisations, but there are serious allegations that these crimes are the direct results of religious cleansing of the indigenous Bangladeshi Hindus and other minorities.

The question that we must all ask is why there is a deafening silence on the subject from the authorities in Bangladesh. Why do the Bangladesh Government not institute an independent inquiry into those deaths? Why is there no evidence that perpetrators have been brought to justice? Why is the full protection of the law not afforded to the minorities in Bangladesh? Those are serious questions, to which we need answers.

It is not only the Hindu community that is the victim—the Ahmadiyya community has suffered the same fate. The campaign of hatred has resulted in attacks on places of worship. Again, I cite the Amnesty International report on Bangladesh, which says:

"On 31 October, Shah Alam, the Imam of the

Ahmadiyya mosque, was beaten to death in front of his family. Some 90 men led by a local Islamist leader attacked him because he refused their demands to recant his Ahmadiyya faith".

To date no one has been charged in connection with that killing.

Although there is a constitutional guarantee for freedom of religion and expression, Ahmadiyya literature is still being banned, as my noble friend Lord Avebury said. The Christian community has not been spared, either. A church in Gopalganj was seriously damaged by a bomb blast.

The constitution of Bangladesh enshrines secularism as one of its main pillars, and did not allow religion-based politics. However, following the death of the founding father, Sheikh Mujibar Rahman, an amendment to the constitution allowed for religion-based politics.

Some months ago my noble friend Lord Avebury and I had the privilege to meet Sheikh Hasina. She was the Prime Minister of Bangladesh from 1996 to 2001. She is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibar Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh. She is the current leader of the opposition in Parliament. It is a serious concern that she was a victim of a grenade attack which nearly cost her life. Many were killed on that occasion.

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There have been assassinations of Members of Parliament. First, it was Ahsanullah Master and then Mr Shah Ams Kibria. In the case of the latter it is worth quoting the editor of the Daily Star which stated:

"The choice of Kibria as the target should not be lost on anybody. He was one of the staunchest voices of secularism and against extremism, terrorism and increasing use of religion in our politics. He was one of the early warning voices against Taliban penetration into our national politics".

This is a serious comment against a nation moved from secularism to supporting fundamentalism. That is not to blame Islam. It is one of the great religions of the world. Fundamentalism and Islam are incompatible, as demonstrated by a large number of Muslims throughout the world. Equally, the rise in extremism often ignored or directly or indirectly supported by those in power must be a matter of serious concern to all of us.

Bangladesh started as a liberal, peaceful, tolerant



nation but is that the case now? Some of the examples may seem isolated incidents, but the total of more than 165 deaths and more than 1,700 injuries since 1999 cannot be ignored. The Awami League and its supporters have borne the brunt of such incidents. However, it is even more disturbing to find that those figures include leading intellectuals and journalists. There is evidence that over the past eight months 230 custodial deaths, apparently in cross-fire with the Rapid Action Battalion, have been recorded. Again, there are serious allegations of extra judicial executions. Such allegations will gather momentum until such time as they are properly and independently investigated. Already the European Union heads of missions in Dhaka have issued a public statement expressing their "shock and dismay" and their deep concern that the apparent failure to investigate previous attacks had led to a climate of impunity. The US Department of State has drawn attention to the failure of the government to bring to justice the perpetrators of acts of violence, fostering an intimidating climate of insecurity and impunity that encourages further attacks. Peaceful protests are part of any democratic country but these have been met with violence and brutality. The conference I chaired last Saturday also received information on the repression of non-government organisations in Bangladesh. The NETZ Partnership for Development and Justice is a German NGO specialising in Bangladesh since 1979. It is supporting 10 NGOs in development work. I am informed by Ingo Ritz, the executive director, that NGOs in Bangladesh are facing serious threats. The government do not allow NGOs to work or hinder their work. Additionally, there were attacks on the offices and six co-workers were injured. A fundamentalist group is claiming responsibility for that. It would be easy to blame the government of Bangladesh for all this. What is required is a very clear independent investigation to get to the root of why such violence occurs. The country's non-governmental organisations are among the most active in the world and successive governments have developed effective

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partnerships with them to improve services to the poorest people. It is a tragedy that some of the NGOs are the targets of repression. The British Government should bring pressure on the

Bangladesh Government to investigate and prosecute criminals responsible for violent attacks and grenade blasts on leading members of the opposition, the British High Commission, arts and cultural events, members and institutions of religious minorities and secular groups.

In essence the world community cares about a genuine democracy in Bangladesh. That democracy can survive only if the rule of law prevails and there is a halt to the abuses of human rights quite rightly mentioned by the noble Baroness, Lady Uddin.

We all have a responsibility to ensure that the Bangladesh Development Forum concentrates on good governance and maintenance of a stable democracy based on respect, dignity and freedom for all its citizens. The country has gone through some turbulent times. It cannot afford to sacrifice its founder's dream of a truly democratic society. We want a healthy, prosperous Bangladesh. It has to confront its own problems if it is to regain respect in world politics.

2.45 pm

Lord Astor of Hever: My Lords, I, too, congratulate the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, on sponsoring this important debate. I totally agree with the noble Lord, Lord Dholakia, that the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, has a noble record in addressing human rights issues and that many people are alive today because of him. There has been much criticism of Bangladesh in this debate, and rightly so. However, I would also like to congratulate the Bangladesh cricket team on its stunning victory over Australia and hope that that is a harbinger of better things to come.

Bangladesh is one of the world's most densely populated countries. Poverty is widespread with almost half the population living on less than a dollar a day. The noble Earl, Lord Sandwich, rightly said that the Bangladeshi people have endured much. However, the noble Baroness, Lady Uddin, pointed out that Bangladesh has managed to reduce population growth and has improved health and education. It should also be congratulated on its excellent peacekeeping duties.

However, political tensions have spilled over into violence in recent years. The political antagonism between the Awami League, which governed until July 2001, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party reflects personal animosity between their leaders rather than substantial ideological differences. Scores of people have been killed and hundreds injured in

attacks at opposition gatherings and public venues. Senior opposition figures have also been targeted. Although Bangladesh signed the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in September 2000, it has been criticised by organisations such as Christian Aid and Amnesty International for its poor human rights record. In a report released at the Bangladesh Development

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Forum on 15 May 2003, Amnesty International highlighted the fact that successive governments in Bangladesh have failed to curb serious human rights violations arising from the use of legislation and widespread practices in the law enforcement and justice system.

These violations include torture, deaths in custody, arbitrary detention of government opponents and others, excessive use of force leading at times to extra-judicial executions, the death penalty, sporadic attacks against members of minority groups, acts of violence against women and harassment of journalists. The noble Lord, Lord Avebury, pointed out that Bangladesh is the second most dangerous country in the world in which to be a journalist.

Amnesty International went on to highlight its concerns about two specific laws that facilitate endemic human rights violations in Bangladesh: the Special Powers Act, which allows arbitrary detention for long periods of time without charge; and Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which facilitates torture in police or army custody.

On coming to power the BNP-led government pledged to take a number of actions to improve human rights. Last year the Anti-corruption Commission Act was passed. As a result an independent anti-corruption commission was set up in the second half of last year after concerted donor lobbying but has yet to become fully effective. According to Amnesty International there has been little progress made on other key reforms such as the separation of the judiciary and executive in lower level courts and the formation of an independent human rights commission.

As the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, said, the police themselves are frequently accused of a wide range of human rights violations, taking bribes, and failing to prevent other human rights abuses. They are becoming increasingly tolerant of the threatening and inciting behaviour of political and religious extremist activists. Deaths in police custody have risen significantly.

Several hundred thousand people are awaiting trial, and prison conditions are poor. Will the Minister say something about the aid that we are giving for police reform and training?

Several noble Lords mentioned the Chittagong Hill Tracts. There have been internal tensions since the 1960s between the Bengali settlers and the tribal inhabitants there. The Bangladesh Government initiated discussions with representatives of the tribal inhabitants in December 1996 which, as I understand it, resulted in a peace accord being signed in December 1997. But there has been little progress on implementing it or on settling the land disputes that are at the heart of many of the tensions between tribal inhabitants and Bengali settlers. What steps are Her Majesty's Government taking to urge the Bangladesh national Government to fully implement that peace accord?

Bangladeshi law states that, "Every citizen has the right to profess, practice or propagate any religion",

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and that,

"Every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institution".

Despite that, there have been multiple attacks on religious minorities, including Hindus and the Ahmadiyya community, since the BNP Government came to power in October 2001. The noble Lord, Lord Dholakia, and the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Coventry both mentioned attacks on the Ahmadiyya. They are a small—100,000 strong—minority Muslim movement. Since 2003, there have been anti-Ahmadiyya attacks on mosques and demands that they be declared non-Muslim. In January last year, the government of Bangladesh authorised a ban on all publications of the Ahmadiyya community. The ban, enforcement of which was subsequently suspended by the courts pending further deliberations, violates Bangladesh's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to uphold human rights and freedom. Amnesty International has criticised the Bangladesh Government for banning those publications and for not taking action against the hate campaign.

Human Rights Watch released a 45-page report earlier this month entitled *Breach of Faith: Persecution of the*

Ahmadiyya Community in Bangladesh, in which it accuses the Bangladesh Government of failing to act against those responsible and complicity in violence against the country's Ahmadiyyas. It alleged that the two junior partners in Bangladesh's coalition government—the JI and the IOJ—have incited violence against the Ahmadiyyas. It highlights specific examples, such as the incident in Bogra in March this year, when 10,000 KN supporters armed with rods marched on an Ahmadiyya mosque; and the attack in Satkhira in April when a mob led by the KN attacked members of the community, injuring at least 25 people.

Although the BNP claims that it is not instigating attacks on minorities, the Prime Minister and other leaders in Bangladesh have failed to demand that coalition partners desist from any role in aiding or abetting attacks and restrictions on religious minorities. That is because the ruling BNP Government hold power as part of a four-party coalition. In the most recent election, the BNP-led coalition won by a very close margin of 46 per cent to 42 per cent over the AL. The JI-IOJ alliance with the BNP determines if the BNP remains in power. Consequently, the BNP appears to be conceding to the pressure of the anti-Ahmadiyya while attempting to minimise bloodshed.

Human Rights Watch argues that if the BNP's political strategy is to give in to some extremist demands, thereby retaining JI and IOJ support, while simultaneously working to maintain peace, the policy is not only dangerous but appears to be failing. Brad Adams, executive director of Human Rights Watch's Asia division, pointed out:

"It's a dangerous moment in Bangladesh when the government becomes complicit in religious violence". Will Her Majesty's Government put pressure on the Bangladesh National Party to stop the human rights abuses that are currently taking place against the Ahmadiyya community?

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Several noble Lords have mentioned problems against the Hindus. Amnesty International has been particularly concerned about the persecution of Hindus since the general election in 2001. Hindus in Bangladesh have tended to vote for and support parties such as the Awami League. They have therefore been the target of political backlash by supporters of parties opposing the Awami League.

Also, as a minority community in Bangladesh sharing a language and religion with the Indian populations of West Bengal, Hindus have been subjected to discriminatory practices or attacks by Muslim groups in Bangladesh. Since its independence, no government in Bangladesh have taken any decisive steps to protect Hindus in the face of murder, rape, kidnapping, temple destruction and physical intimidation.

While both Hindu men and women have been subjected to attacks and intimidation, Hindu women have also been subjected to sexual violence. The Awami League points out that as a party to the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, the Bangladesh Government are required to take steps without delay to eliminate discrimination against women in Bangladesh.

According to a report published by the Hindu American Foundation, which asserts that the human rights of Hindu citizens are consistently violated, over 400 documented attacks took place on Bangladeshi Hindus last year. The report urges the international community to compel the government of Bangladesh to respect the human rights of Hindus as an urgent priority. In the light of that, what steps are the Government taking to address human rights abuses against the Hindu community there?

There have been some attempts by the Bangladesh Government to address the growing political and religious violence, for example, implementing Operation Clean Heart, the signing of the peace accord, and the establishment of the anti-corruption commission. There is a good deal of criticism about how effective those measures are. Meanwhile, the level of political and religious violence in Bangladesh is increasing, and the BNP is not taking sufficient steps to address it. Indeed, it seems to be positively turning a blind eye to the religious violence taking place against the Hindu and Ahmadiyya communities. Unfortunately, that is emboldening extremists, which is deeply worrying.

I hope that the Bangladesh High Commission in London will listen carefully to, and act on, what has been said in this debate about the worrying events in that country, particularly as there is a great deal of goodwill to Bangladesh. She has many, many friends in this country.

2.59 pm

Lord Triesman: My Lords, I start with a heartfelt word

of apology for arriving after the beginning of the debate. I was at a G8 preparatory meeting on debt and trade and word arrived slightly too late, despite my efforts at athleticism, for me to be here right at the beginning. I particularly regret it because I would not

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want any sense of discourtesy to the House, and least of all to the noble Lord, Lord Avebury. Let me just say at once that I apologise for that.

I am most grateful to the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, for giving the House the opportunity to discuss the situation in Bangladesh. His energy and commitment in defending human rights and campaigning against religious persecution are second to none, as the noble Lord, Lord Dholakia, rightly observed. I hope that the House will not feel that the issue is not also close to my heart. I am grateful to all noble Lords who have taken part in the debate.

I shall start with the first issue of substance. It is to do with the meeting held at SOAS, which was raised by the noble Lord, Lord Avebury. The High Commissioner saw a senior official in the department shortly before the conference. We took the view that it was a private event. We will always support meetings within the law and academic life, and the FCO was interested in events. I am glad to say that the High Commissioner ensured his attendance and tried to come to grips with some of the issues rather than protesting. We were glad that the government of Bangladesh were represented in that way at that meeting.

Let me say a few words about our relationship with Bangladesh. Britain and Bangladesh have been partners for centuries in politics, trade, and cultural and social interchange. That partnership is growing right across the board. Our trade with Bangladesh is growing. Bangladeshi exports to the United Kingdom in 2004 were up more than 10 per cent at £635 million. UK exports to Bangladesh also grew by 20 per cent. The United Kingdom remains Bangladesh's single largest investor.

Britain is also in the forefront of Bangladesh's efforts to help to combat poverty and meet the millennium development goals. We are Bangladesh's largest bilateral development aid donor. Our development programme rose to £125 million in 2004 and a similar figure is planned for 2005. I hope that we will be counted as a friend in need: the United Kingdom contributed £29 million to relief efforts following the

terrible floods in 2004. In regard to that appalling natural event, I acknowledge the sterling efforts made by my noble friend Lady Uddin, and the generosity of the British-Bangladeshi community.

Even more importantly, the links between our people are deep, forged not least by a vibrant British-Bangladeshi community. Cultural, religious and linguistic contributions are invaluable to a multicultural society. We are friends of long standing with a broad and dynamic relationship. Of course, however, there are issues of concern that noble Lords have rightly raised.

As noble Lords are aware, Bangladesh's early history was difficult and marked by tragedy, with a bloody liberation war, famine, assassination, coups and military rule. My noble friend Lady Uddin mentioned some of those. But the struggle for freedom and democracy achieved a hard-won multiparty system in 1991, and there have been two peaceful

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transfers of power since. It is a relatively short time, but there has also been tremendous economic and social progress, including food self-sufficiency, a dramatic fall in population growth, improved access to education—especially for girls—increased economic diversification, and recent economic growth at more than 5 per cent per annum.

Bangladesh has also seen a flowering of civil society. The noble Earl, Lord Sandwich, made particular mention of the microcredit organisations, which are world leaders. I am proud that DfID has taken a role in helping to establish them. Bangladesh also has a free and vibrant press, which is to be cherished. Of course, dangers and threats to it are not acceptable. They should not be tolerated, and we will raise the issues that have been identified by the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, with the Bangladeshi authorities.

As a whole, there have been tremendous achievements of which all Bangladeshi people can be proud, as the noble Lord, Lord Astor, said. They provide many of the prerequisites for a democratic and prosperous society, and we all want to see that in Bangladesh. Precious gains that must be safeguarded have been achieved in a difficult environment.

Bangladesh's elected leaders have a leading role to play. The divisive relationship, to which many noble Lords have referred, between the two main political parties affects all aspects of the way in which Bangladesh is governed. The noble Lord, Lord Astor,



emphasised the point a few moments ago. Politicians need to demonstrate more clearly a commitment to democratic values and institutions which rise above party-political divisions and meet the aspirations of the Bangladeshi people. Constructive dialogue between the main parties is essential for the proper running of any parliamentary democracy, and Bangladesh needs it urgently.

I also take note of the reports from Amnesty International. They are telling. On one side, there are positive steps in anti-corruption, but on the other, some elements in the regime of law make democratic life extremely difficult. We stand ready to help in any way in which we can.

Bangladesh will have parliamentary elections by January 2007, crucial tests of its democracy.

Successful democratic elections will require a genuinely level playing field, full participation by all parties and a peaceful and efficient voting process. We urge all sides to commit themselves to that, and to make the compromises necessary to achieve it. We and others in the international community are ready to help.

It is not always easy, and perhaps not always useful, to make a distinction between political violence and terrorism. It is sad that the history of Bangladesh contains instances of political violence, and the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, is right to highlight the instances of violence over recent years, as have other noble Lords, including the noble Lord, Lord Dholakia. As a friend of Bangladesh, we are seriously concerned by the law and order situation generally, and especially by the series of seemingly similar attacks on senior political targets.

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The 21 August 2004 grenade attack on the rally in Dhaka of the opposition Awami League was an attack on Bangladeshi democracy itself, as were the murders of the widely-respected former Finance Minister, the opposition MP and their colleagues. The only possible response to such attacks is outright condemnation and a determination to bring to justice those responsible. My right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary wrote to the Bangladeshi Prime Minister after the 21 August attack calling for a transparent and credible investigation to bring the perpetrators to justice. My right honourable friend Douglas Alexander raised the lack of progress in the 21 August investigation with the Bangladeshi Prime Minister when visiting Dhaka

in December 2004. He spoke also to the leader of the opposition.

We are trying to assist the investigations, through our High Commission in Dhaka and in whatever other ways we can. Specialist officers of the Metropolitan Police also visited Sylhet shortly after the attack on the British High Commission, to assist the Bangladeshi police with their investigations. A second visit to Bangladesh was made in July. They have continued to provide assistance to the authorities there. The Bangladeshi Government have not requested assistance from us in any other investigation.

The Bangladeshi Prime Minister gave a personal undertaking to Douglas Alexander that the investigations into the attacks would be pursued to a conclusion. Although there has been some progress in other investigations—there have been arrests and other prosecutions—we regret that, to date, nobody has been arrested or prosecuted for the 21 August attack. I shall make what we are doing clear to my noble friend Lady Uddin. We will continue to make it clear to the government of Bangladesh how essential it is to demonstrate to the Bangladeshi people and to the international community that they are doing everything in their powers to bring to justice all those behind the attacks, whoever they may be. To avoid a climate of impunity, justice needs to be done and seen to be done.

Extremism was described in the debate as a cancer, and I agree. Bangladesh is not immune from terrorism. No country is. However, it is also right to acknowledge the contribution that the country has made to UN peacekeeping. Bangladeshi troops wearing blue berets stand in the way of extremism in many difficult parts of the world. However, like other countries, Bangladesh must face the dangers posed to it by domestic and international terrorism, and take decisive action to tackle them. The noble Lord, Lord Avebury, is right to suggest that there has been some worrying extremist activity recently, of which the examples in journalism are among some of the most significant.

We welcome recent acknowledgements by the Bangladeshi Prime Minister and other senior Ministers about the dangers posed by terrorism. We also welcome some positive steps such as the banning of two extremist groups in February 2005 and the Bangladeshi Government's commitment to sign all UN counter-terrorism conventions. We look forward to the required legislation being passed soon by the

Bangladeshi parliament. The UK and other

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international partners are already working with the Bangladeshi authorities to try to improve their counter-terrorism capacity. We will assist further. At the base of all of this is the need for respect of human rights. Whatever the motivations of those who carry out criminal acts, it is incumbent upon any government to apply the law. There are worrying indications that the Rapid Action Battalion and the police in Bangladesh are not always doing so. The noble Lord, Lord Dholakia, emphasised our anxieties and I agree with him that the RAB causes anxiety. There is a need for a clear investigation and prosecutions as necessary. We look to the Bangladeshi Government to see that their security agencies are fully accountable.

The attack in Sylhet in May 2004, in which our High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Mr Anwar Choudhury, was injured and three people were killed, was a shocking event. I believe that noble Lords will want to join me in acknowledging Mr Choudhury's courage in returning to his post so rapidly and, more widely, to recognise the courage and dedication of many of our diplomats working in dangerous environments around the world.

Specialists from the Metropolitan Police were deployed to Bangladesh immediately after the attack. We are disappointed that the investigation has not yet led to the arrest and prosecution of those responsible. It will remain at the very top of our agenda in all our high-level contacts with the Bangladeshi Government. The investigation must be pursued to a conclusion and those who died deserve no less. The noble Earl, Lord Sandwich, reminded us that paramedics and people working with the NGOs also lose their lives. Those investigations are equally important to us and must be pursued.

I want to turn to religious intolerance and violence. Bangladeshi society has a history of moderation and tolerance. The vast majority of Bangladeshis are strongly opposed to religious extremism. Sadly, there is evidence of intolerance. As the noble Lord, Lord Avebury, and the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Coventry have rightly pointed out, sadly, there is considerable evidence of intolerance against minorities. The situation of the Ahmadiyya community is a pertinent example. There can be no excuse for the organised intimidation against that

peaceful community which has taken place over the past two years. Drawing on a phrase used by the right reverend Prelate, there is no such thing as the obscure persecution of an obscure group. It touches us all and it is fundamental to civilised life.

I feel that strongly. My mother's family were encouraged to leave Spain in 1492 in circumstances which meant that those who survived were then encouraged to leave almost every other European country. Such intolerance against religious groups frequently leads to the most excessive violence and murder that is experienced in the world. We all have the deepest commitment to ensuring that it is stopped. I assure the right reverend Prelate that we regularly seek to highlight this issue and to support the rights of Ahmadis and other minorities and have lobbied

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extensively in that regard. The British High Commission in Dhaka maintains close contacts with the Ahmadiyya community. The European Community will be closely involved. The local EU presidency raised the situation with the home Minister in May. The European heads of mission demonstrated their solidarity in late 2004 by visiting an Ahmadiyya mosque under threat from the extremists. Such support will continue to be visible.

On occasions, the Bangladeshi police have prevented violence but the authorities have too often shown too little determination to stand up to the extremists. The moves to ban Ahmadiyya publications was a particularly regrettable example. We will continue to encourage the Bangladeshi authorities to take a proactive and unequivocal approach to meeting their constitutional and international human rights obligations to all minorities. I will certainly look at the suggestion made by my noble friend Lady Uddin for parliamentary contact and visits. Transparency in governance and debt relief all hang together.

Several other questions were raised and I touch on them briefly. The situation in the Rohingya refugee camps is being raised by the British High Commission. We have taken a close interest, with the support of the UNHCR. Officials have visited the camps on several occasions and it is my understanding, which I will confirm, that they will continue to do so. It is a difficult situation to resolve, but we are encouraging the government of Bangladesh to be flexible in their resolve and to deal with the situation with the appropriate levels of attention.

I was also asked by the noble Earl, Lord Sandwich, to comment on the Government's assistance to the Biharis. We are well aware of their problems and we recognise the historical context. However, essentially this is an issue for the governments of Bangladesh and Pakistan. We are encouraging them to come to a long-term resolution, because that is obviously what is now needed. I am pleased to confirm the noble Earl's understanding that the British High Commission is implementing a project and I will write to the noble Earl with further details on how it is progressing.

I was asked by the noble Lord, Lord Astor of Hever, to comment on the rights of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. We again look to the Bangladeshi Government to implement in full the 1997 peace agreement in full consultation with local communities. We welcome that peace accord, which ended large-scale violence in those hill tracts. We are disappointed that there has not been the progress and implementation we would have all wished. We raised the issue and we will continue to do so. We are encouraging the government to implement the agreement fully. We will stay in close contact with the representatives of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and we will support the work of the United Nations Development Programme.

The theme that has run through this important debate is that a threat is consistently posed to the rule of law in Bangladesh. So much of it comes down to the stability of the rule of law, which is an essential underpinning of any democratic society. The UK is working actively in Bangladesh to strengthen the rule of

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law in practical ways. It is working with the government and with civil society. I can tell the noble Lord, Lord Astor, that the Department for International Development is providing £5 million over the next three years to a major UNDP-managed police reform project, for which he rightly called, in conjunction with the government of Bangladesh. We are also supporting local NGOs engaged in developing alternative dispute resolution. This innovative approach is beginning to produce results.

Security concerns have damaged Bangladesh's reputation. All nations rely on having a good reputation. It is all the more reason why we need to deepen our engagement with that country and to continue our work to support Bangladesh's continued economic and democratic development. We most

certainly will do so.

3.18 pm

Lord Avebury: My Lords, I am extremely grateful to all noble Lords who have taken part. Perhaps I may express special thanks to the noble Baroness, Lady Uddin. She has conveyed to the House her enormous experience and breadth of knowledge of Bangladesh issues and has given valuable advice on how we should deal with these problems. I like her suggestion that a parliamentary delegation should visit Bangladesh and freely and openly discuss some of the issues with which we have dealt today.

I agree that it cannot be right to sweep these matters under the carpet. Whatever the response may be, issues need to be discussed. She rightly pointed to many aspects of the enormous progress that has been made, such as the economic growth of Bangladesh. The contribution it has made to the peacekeeping efforts of the United Nations was mentioned by other noble Lords. All that could be swept away if they do not get to grip with the worsening law and order situation.

As your Lordships have acknowledged, if particular efforts are not made in the lead up to the elections next year to ensure that there is a proper contest, the Ahmadiis may feel, in the climate of violence and repression against their members, that they have to boycott the event. Even higher-level efforts than a parliamentary delegation may be required, although that would be useful.

To persuade the opposition that it is safe for it to take part in the election, and that there will not be violence and intimidation of those who seek to contest it, I suggest to the Minister that all hands must be brought to the pump. That will require not just individual, bilateral efforts between the United Kingdom and Bangladesh, valuable though they are, but also the efforts of the European Union, maybe through SARC, and through the United Nations. Every effort must be made to ensure that those elections take place fairly and that there is a level playing field for the parties.

I was also extremely grateful to the right reverend Prelate for highlighting the situation in the Ahmadiyya community. Although it is not the only religious minority under threat, it has suffered disproportionately. When the High Commissioner spoke at the conference on Friday, it was significant

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that he attempted to dismiss their concerns as being those of a very small minority of only 100,000 people and as not important in relation to the size of the majority Suni community. Of course, as the right reverend Prelate says, it does not matter how small they are, their rights are exactly the same as everyone else's. I hope that we continue to impress that view on the Bangladeshi Government.

I am concerned about one point that was not mentioned in the debate: we have never received any response to those representations. I know, from the correspondence that I have with Ministers at the Foreign Office, that they continually raise these matters, for which I am very grateful to them. We do not receive any feedback from the Bangladeshi authorities, nor do we hear them standing up and condemning what is happening. I am open to correction if I am wrong in that, but I believe it is true to say that we have never heard Prime Minister Khaleda Zia speaking against the persecution of the Ahmadis, against the attitude of the police towards the violation and desecration of mosques and against the attacks on individual members of the Ahmadi community. Of course, we know that it is part and parcel of their viewpoint that the Ahmadis are, in some respects, a substandard people because they wish to ban their publications. That attitude infects the behaviour of the security authorities towards religious minorities.

I do not wish to go through every aspect of the problem again in my concluding remarks. I believe that this is an ongoing subject for debate, which we have not exhausted this afternoon. At Friday's conference, it was decided that we would form an international network of organisations concerned with the promotion of democracy and the rule of law in Bangladesh. We hope to join up with similar organisations in Germany, the Netherlands and elsewhere.

This debate is part of an ongoing discussion which I imagine will be continued up until polling day in 2006 and in which the people of this country can join, together with those who are fighting for freedom and democracy in Bangladesh. We shall ensure, come what may, that the freedoms and rights of the minorities, whether political, ethnic or religious, are fully taken care of by the concerted efforts of people in Bangladesh and throughout the world. I beg leave to withdraw the Motion of Papers.

Motion for Papers, by leave, withdrawn.

More to come ----

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**Commonwealth\_of\_Australia\_House\_of\_representatives  
votes\_and\_proceeding**

**COMMONWEALTH OF  
AUSTRALIA  
HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

Votes and Proceedings

Hansard

THURSDAY, 16 JUNE 2005

CORRECTIONS

This is a PROOF ISSUE. Suggested corrections for  
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Thursday, 23 June 2005

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House of Representatives (02) 6277 2944

Main Committee (02) 6277 8368

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES

## PROOF

## Australian Forum for Minorities in Bangladesh

Ms OWENS (Parramatta) (9.54 am)—On Monday I attended a public forum at the Parramatta Town Hall. It was hosted by the Australian Forum for Minorities in Bangladesh, known by the short name Aus-Bangla. It was an event that focused community attention on the treatment of minorities of all kinds. I have been attending Aus- Bangla's events since its launch in November last year, a very small beginning for a very large idea. I attended its second event, a fundraiser for the tsunami victims earlier this year and the symbolic donation of blood representing the giving from one person to another. The third event, on Monday, represented another step forward for this

young organisation—the launch of Bangladesh Minorities Day and the publishing of the first edition of Minority Voice, a community newsletter that draws attention to the plight of minorities in Bangladesh in particular.

I would like to acknowledge the commitment of those who made this happen, particularly Prabir Maitra and his family. For Prabir and most Australian Bengalis of all religions the fight for independence and democracy in 1971, which began with the declaration of independence on 26 March and ended nine months later with the emergence of an independent Bangladesh on 16 December, was a fight by all the people of Bangladesh, people of all religions. Around three million died during that nine months, and around 10 million refugees fled to India. After all this, Bangladesh was established as a country committed to secularism, a separation of church and state, as the basis for social and democratic freedoms. That secularism was enshrined in that first constitution. Subsequent amendments have taken Bangladesh backwards. Minorities Day, launched on Monday, marks 9 June 1988, when the constitution was amended to recognise Islam as the state religion.

Aus-Bangla was started by Hindus but now extends much further. It is an organisation committed to bringing all religions together, recognising that around the world you will find people of all and any religion who are persecuted by others for their religious choices. Both Minorities Day and the newsletter Minority Voice are valuable additions to our local

community. While shining a light on the worst of what is happening in a country that many Australians know very little about, both carry in them a hope for the future that the best of human nature will prevail.

I would like to close by reading a message from the president, Prodip Roy Chowdhury, which was published in the first issue of Minority Voice. He said: Observation of the Minority Day is a symbolic act that vehemently protests against the ... injustices and atrocities, which have been taking place in Bangladesh over the years. It is also a day of light and hope for all the oppressed people in Bangladesh. Let us harbour this hope and ignite this light throughout our continued commitments to this great initiative ... I hope the Minority Voice that has also seen the light today will be illuminated as a mouthpiece for many years to come. We will only succeed if this voice reaches to the hearts and minds of millions of people around Australia and the world and bring change to the life and alleviate the sufferings of minorities in Bangladesh.

These people believe that the voice of an individual should be raised to change the world for the better, and they will be coming to an office near you soon. (Time expired)

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**Liberation\_Motion\_taken\_by\_Bangladesh\_Hindu\_Buddhist  
Christian\_Unity\_Council**

**BANGLADESH HINDU BUDDHIST  
CHRISTIAN UNITY COUNCIL**

(An organisation for the establishment of human rights  
of the religious minorities in Bangladesh)

5 Mayfair Avenue Romford Essex RM6 6UD

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0207 247 4575

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Liberation Motion  
Bangladesh:

The AGM notes the various reports of human rights organisations and the continuation of abuse committed by fundamentalist parties. This AGM deplores and condemns the continued rise of violence on the religious minorities - the Hindu, Buddhist, Christians and Ahmadiyya Community. This meeting also notes the repression on the secular group and civil society members and the recent killing of the former Finance Minister and an International diplomat, Mr. Shah A M S Kibria.

The AGM calls on Liberation to make a representation to the Bangladesh Government:

To publicly condemn these attacks.

Bring the perpetrators to justice.

Take initiative to pass anti-racism and anti-discrimination laws in the parliament

Take all necessary steps to stop the killings and harassment of minority and secular groups and prevent such abuses in future.

This AGM also calls on Liberation to take the matter in the United Nations.

The above motion was carried out overwhelmingly at the Annual General Meeting of Liberation held on 25 of June 2005, St. Pancras Church Hall, Euston, London. The chair of the AGM, Rt. Hon Jeremy Corbyn MP, praised the “European Conference of Human Rights of Bangladesh” held on the 17 June 2005 and said it was a conference for Secular Democracy of Bangladesh and hailed it a grand success. He said we must take the matter to the United Nations as soon as possible. It may be mentioned here that Liberation is the one of NGOs who has authority to represent the persecutions of the religious minorities of Bangladesh in the main Conference held in March and August each year. The AGM decided to publish the unacceptable human rights situation in Bangladesh in their publication.

The motion was presented by Sujit Sen and seconded by Sukanta Roy.

Sujit Sen  
General Secretary  
29.06.2005

**Top**

**Conservatives\_in\_the\_European\_Parliament**

From: Conservative Press Office  
[conservative\_press\_office@europarl.eu.int]  
Sent: 15 June 2005 13:03

To: Conservative Press Office  
Subject: Bangladesh: concern at growing radicalism  
Release: Embargoed to Friday 17 June at 10h00  
Date: 15 June 2005  
Issued by: Conservatives in the European Parliament  
Charles Tannock MEP, tel: +32 2 284 5870

Bangladesh: concern at growing radicalism

But crackdown on militants is encouraging, says  
Charles Tannock MEP

BRUSSELS, 15 June 2005 -- Conservative foreign affairs spokesman in the European Parliament, Charles Tannock MEP, today expressed his concern at growing religious intolerance in Bangladesh, but commended the government for cracking down on militants.

Dr Tannock, an MEP for the London region, was speaking at the European Human Rights Conference at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, which is taking place today.

He said the increasingly radical Islamisation of the country was a worrying development. Dr Tannock pointed out that until recently, Bangladesh had a good tradition of tolerance of religious minorities, but that had been undermined by changing the constitution from a secular government to 'sovereignty under Allah'.

Dr Tannock said:

"I'm very disturbed at the apparent breakdown of religious tolerance in Bangladesh and the many attacks on religious minorities that have been reported.

"But there are some signs that the government is moving to rein in organised militant groups responsible for some of the violence.

"The authorities must be true to their promise to bring those responsible for political and religious violence to justice. At the same time, the government needs to ensure full respect for human rights. Journalists, in particular, are in danger, and I urge the government to promote an environment in which a free press can operate safely and without fear.

"The European Union should give Bangladesh, a

Commonwealth country with a large number of people of Bangladeshi descent successfully settled in Britain and other parts of the EU, as much political and financial support as possible. The European Parliament is determined to help the government in its fight against corruption and Islamic fundamentalism. My fellow MEPs and I are determined to keep up the pressure on Bangladesh and insist on full respect for human rights."

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**Press\_statement\_by\_Cecilia\_Wikstrom\_MP\_Swedish\_parliame  
The liberal faction of the  
Peoples Party(Folkpartiet,  
fp)**



Make demands of the Bangladesh government!  
-The international community must demand the cessation of persecution of religious minorities in Bangladesh. It is tragic that fundamentalism and ethnic violence has gotten a foothold in Bangladesh, with its secular tradition. The presiding government has islamic supporting parties which spread hate against the religious minorities according to human rights organizations.

This is the opinion of Cecilia Wikström (fp), a member of parliament from Uppsala, Sweden, whose was one of the head speakers at an interational conference on human rights in Bangladesh arranged at the University of London last Friday.

-Human Rights Watch presented recently a report describing in detail the growing violent actions against the muslim Ahmadiya sect in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government should repeal the ban of Ahmidaya writings, prosecute those responsible for the attacks against the opposition politicians and minorities as well as allow the UN reporter on religious freedom, Asma Jahangir, entrance into the country, says Cecilia Wikström (fp).

-Sweden has a responsibility as a large international aid doner to actively protect religious freedom and human rights. These questions must be central in discussions with the Bangladesh government, concludes Cecilia Wikström, whom today has questioned Minister of Welfare, Carin Jämtin.

## **STATEMENT\_BY\_LORD\_AVEBURY**

**VICE CHAIRMAN  
PARLIAMENTARY HUMAN  
RIGHTS GROUP AND  
CHAIRMAN  
INTERNATIONAL  
BANGLADESH FOUNDATION**

**BANGLADESH HUMAN  
RIGHTS TO BE  
DISCUSSED AT THE  
HOUSE OF LORDS**

**PRESS  
RELEASE  
17 NOV 2005**

The Parliamentary Human Rights Group and the International Bangladesh Foundation are holding a seminar on the current situation in Bangladesh at the House of Lords in November 2005.

On November 21, the report of the international conference 'European Human Rights Conference on Bangladesh: Extremism, Intolerance & Violence' held at SOAS, University of London, on June 17 will be published, and an

International Declaration on the persecution of religious, ethnic and secular minorities in Bangladesh, by Members of a number of legislatures, will be launched. A statement will be made by those principally concerned, including representatives of the religious minorities, the opposition, and victims of terrorist attacks. Mr. Saber Hossain Chowdhury will represent the opposition.

The His Excellency High Commissioner of Bangladesh in UK Mr Sabi Uddin Ahmed and Khondaker Mabubuddin Ahmed Chairman Law and Parliamentary Committee in Bangladesh Parliament will make a statement on behalf of Bangladesh Government on the measures being taken to protect the minorities, to bring the terrorist to justice.

Extremists showed their muscle again in August, when nearly 500 bombs exploded simultaneously throughout Bangladesh, and again in October when there were attempts on the life of judges. In a latest incident two judges were killed in the hand of extremists. The police have still not arrested the ringleaders of the assassination attempts against the Leader of the Opposition and the British High Commissioner last year, and the murder of Shah AMS Kibria, a former Finance Minister, is still unsolved. The extremist Khatme Nabuwwat organisation has again threatened violence against

an Ahmadi Mosque, and called on the government to ban the Ahmadis. The religious minorities are under threat all the time.

The continuing threats to the stability of Bangladesh demand firm action, if democracy and the rule of law is to survive. The international community must do everything possible to shore up human rights and democracy in Bangladesh, since the cancer of extremism will not stop at the borders.



**LORD AVEBURY**

VICE CHAIRMAN  
PARLIAMENTARY HUMAN  
RIGHTS GROUP AND  
CHAIRMAN INTERNATIONAL  
BANGLADESH FOUNDATION

*NB. To attend either of the events please contact Sujit Sen [sujit7@hotmail.com](mailto:sujit7@hotmail.com) or Ansar Ahmed Ullah [admin@shadinata.org.uk](mailto:admin@shadinata.org.uk) - Tel. 0208 599 9630 07956890689*

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**Cancer\_of\_extremism\_in\_Bangladesh\_report\_launched  
at the UK house of  
parliament**

**PRESS RELEASE 21 NOV  
2005**

Following the international conference 'European Human Rights Conference on Bangladesh: Extremism, Intolerance & Violence' held at SOAS, University of London, on June 17 2005, the proceedings report 'Cancer of Extremism' published by SOAS, University of London and International Bangladesh Foundation was launched yesterday, 21 Nov 05 at the UK Houses of Parliament coinciding with an announcement of new international network of human rights organisations who are working on Bangladesh. The event was organised by the UK Parliamentary Human Rights Group and the International Bangladesh Foundation.

Lord Avebury, Vice-Chair of Parliamentary Human Rights Group and Chairman of International Bangladesh Foundation, who presided the event, invited representatives of persecuted groups to report since the conference held in June. Representatives who spoke at the event were Prasanta Barua from the Buddhist community, Anukul Talukder from the Hindu community, James Swapan Peris from the Christian community, Ina Humes from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Prof Salim Malik from the Ahmadiyya community. Speaker gave examples of violent persecution against their own communities, reported non-action against the perpetrators and demanded immediate action from Bangladesh Govt.

In response to this the Bangladesh Govt delegation lead by His Excellency High Commissioner of Bangladesh in UK, Mr Sabi Uddin Ahmed and Khondaker Mahbubuddin Ahmed MP Chairman Law and Parliamentary Committee in Bangladesh Parliament, denied all charges and accused the organisers of acting against the interest of Bangladesh.

Other who spoke at the event were Robert Evans MEP, Brad Adams of Human Rights Watch, Abbas Faiz of Amnesty International, Maggie Bowden of Liberation, Prof Werner Menski, Jeremy Corbyn MP and Saber Hussain

Chowdhury representing the opposition in Bangladesh.

The speakers stated, to deny persecution would make it difficult to have any positive dialogue, without acknowledging the facts one couldn't engage any meaningful communication. The speakers further pointed out people who are involved with the initiative are true friends of Bangladesh and wanted the best for the country and also reminded Bangladesh Govt delegation some of them were actively involved in the independence movement of Bangladesh in 1971. Prof Menski said, 'to say persecution doesn't exist itself is terrorism', and 'disappointed to hear of denial from the Bangladesh Govt representatives'. Jeremy Corbyn MP said, there is ample evidence of persecution and harassment and he would raise the matter at House of Commons. Referring to the adverse comment made by Bangladesh High Commissioner, Mr Corbyn MP said that declaration have been signed by the members of the parliament on the basis of the situation on the ground. He said, 'we are not here to do propaganda'. He reminded that UK played a vital role in the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh and wants to see a prosperous Bangladesh.

In a message Charles Tannock MEP said, 'we must keep an eye on Bangladesh



due to growing extremism'.

Lord Avebury in his final remarks said, Extremists showed their muscle again in August, when nearly 500 bombs exploded simultaneously throughout Bangladesh, and again in October when there were attempts on the life of judges. In a latest incident two judges were killed in the hand of extremists. The police have still not arrested the ringleaders of the assassination attempts against the Leader of the Opposition and the British High Commissioner last year, and the murder of Shah AMS Kibria, a former Finance Minister, is still unsolved. The extremist Khatme Nabuwwat organisation has again threatened violence against the Ahmadiyya community, and called on the government to ban the Ahmadis.

Lord Avebury further stated, the newly formed Bangladesh International Foundation may conduct an analysis of the political environment in which the 2006 elections are to be held, looking at security of candidates and election workers and freedom of assembly and may send a delegation to Bangladesh.

On the terrorism front, the Bangladesh International Foundation will take up the matter with UN Anti Terrorism Committee [formed in pursuance to Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001)] to get involved

as SC Resolution 1373  
addresses a number of  
terrorism related issues that  
are relevant to the recent  
developments and the current  
situation in Bangladesh.

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