

Dr. Richard L. Benkin

521 North Pine Street
Mount Prospect, IL 60056-2056
<http://www.InterfaithStrength.com>
Also available on FACEBOOK and on TUMBLR as bdhindus

Mobile Phone: 847-922-6426
Email: drbenkin@comcast.net

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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing
Elections and Human Rights in Bangladesh
2200 Rayburn House Office Building

Written Statement of Dr. Richard L. Benkin
Independent Human Rights Activist
President and Founder, Forcefield NFP

The choice before us is simple: Do we continue our complicity in the destruction of Bangladesh's Hindus; or do we stand on the side of justice and take action? Do we continue clinging to a myth that pogroms against Bangladesh's Hindus are mere anomalies, or do we address the reality of endemic human rights violations there and uphold the principles on which both our own and Bangladesh's constitutions are based?

I have been fighting the ethnic cleansing of Hindus in Bangladesh for well over a decade. I go there regularly (twice so far this year), to help victims, confront victimizers, and document government complicity. Most of this statement comes from my first-hand experience or my network of vetted informants on the ground.¹ In 1951, Hindus represented almost a third of East Pakistan's population. When East Pakistan became Bangladesh in 1971, they were less than one in five; thirty years later fewer than one in ten; and only one in 15 today. If anyone cannot see where this is headed, look at Pakistan where Hindus are down to one percent; or at Afghanistan or Kashmir, where once thriving Hindu communities are all but gone. The difference between those places and Bangladesh is that we have a chance to prevent the total destruction of the Hindu community there. There are more than 12 million souls in immediate danger, and we each have a moral imperative not to sit by idly.

Unfortunately, humanity's record in preventing mass persecution is shameful. Former President Bill Clinton has lamented the inaction that cost [300,000 Rwandan lives](#) during his watch. Despite decades of denials, it is now clear that the [western allies and others](#) had ample [evidence](#) of the Nazi holocaust and chose not to act. And even when we *seemed* to be paying attention, action, if any, was marginally effective at best. [Just ask](#) the Yazidis or the Darfuris and other ethnic minorities in the Sudans. So, do we wring our hands when it's too late; or do we save lives starting today?

Despite the millions of victims, this is "a quiet case of ethnic cleansing" (which is the title of my book on this subject). With no *gestapo* or *Janjaweed*, no concentration camps or killing centers; it flies under the international human rights radar.

¹ Also see Benkin, Richard L. 2012. *A Quiet Case of Ethnic Cleansing: the Murder of Bangladesh's Hindus* (New Delhi: Akshaya Prakashan).

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Bangladesh is a friendly nation that publicly condemns human rights atrocities and calls itself an ally. It calls itself secular, though it has an official state religion; and I know a lot of people in the government. They are decent people who, I believe, share the values of religious freedom and equality that their constitution proclaims as national values. Their good intentions, however, have not been able to stop the atrocities; atrocities that only worsen as radical Islamists grow stronger there by the day. As former [Congressman Bob Dold](#) told the House in 2011, “Since 1947, 49 million Hindus in Bangladesh have gone missing.” But what is that line (erroneously) attributed to Joseph Stalin? “One death is a tragedy, a million deaths a statistic.” So I will put it into a relatable context.

- In December 2012, government officials and others abducted 23-year old Eti Biswas from Bagerhat in Southwestern Bangladesh. Her family was told to abandon its small piece of land and leave Bangladesh, that Hindus were not wanted there. They refused, even after police and other officials “encouraged” them to do so. Eti Biswas’s violent abduction was the response. Her family pleaded with me to help recover their child. Earlier that same day—not more than 125 miles from where she was taken—Bangladeshi Home Minister Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir angrily denied any Hindu persecution in his country or the right of an American to raise the issue; but said if I encountered any evidence, I should sent it to him and he would “take care of the matter personally.” I sent him extensive evidence on this abduction and asked for the help he promised. It never came, and Eti Biswas remains missing.
- That same year, human rights advocate Rabindra Ghosh and I trekked to a remote Hindu village in the far northern district of Dinajpur. No long before our arrival, a mob of over 100 Muslims attacked this village of 80 Hindu families after their imam claimed that Allah decreed that the land should be used for a mosque. The imam erroneously thought this is was fight between Hinduism and Islam. Yes, Muslims attacked the village, thought it was a Muslim religious duty, and were protected by a Muslim government with Islam as its official state religion. At the same time, the only thing standing between the village and another pogrom was four Muslim police, who told me that while the attackers threaten to “return and finish the job,” they would have to get through them first. They go there on their own time as frequently as they can because, they told me, “the government will do nothing.” And they were worried for the villagers.

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There are those who seem to have difficulty finding examples of government complicity in anti-Hindu persecution. For their benefit, here is what I experienced directly in just two days this March.

- I got a call to defend a very old and poor Hindu temple in Dhaka. It was facing escalating threats and attacks from Muslim mobs, and the police refused even to take their calls. My team and I intervened to hold off the attack, and then confronted the local police. They had no excuse for their inaction, tried to claim ignorance although I saw police in the temple area; and finally agreed to post armed security at the temple.
- That same evening, I was called to a Hindu home that had been looted and ransacked by a Muslim mob that day with special animus toward the family prayer room and its deities. The family, having escaped the violence, returned to see if they could salvage anything; but they couldn't. The police got wind that I was coming and posted guards. But the police head and others could *not* explain to me how this sizeable mob was able to ransack this home, located right in the capital, *for over four and a half hours in broad daylight* without any police intervention.
- The next day, Rabindra Ghosh and I went with another Hindu family whose land was seized violently two years prior with police taking no action against the usurpers or defending the rightful owners. After extensive talks and legal efforts, we got the Hindu owners their land.

I asked myself if any of that would have happened were I not there; and, sadly, history tells us it would not. In August, I gave United States (US) State Department evidence of 23 targeted, anti-Hindu attacks in Bangladesh during the first seven months of this year alone. All were validated by at least two independent witnesses, and all were allowed to proceed with impunity. Despite knowledge of specific criminals involved, Bangladeshi did not act. (The material submitted to State is attached to and is part of this statement.)

In what kind of situation does justice depend on some guy from halfway around the world being present and the government not wanting to anger America that day? The victims were Hindu; the perpetrators Muslim. A nation with the noblest of constitutional sentiments about religious equality is empowering a religious majority to savage a religious minority. Whether that is intentional or not is immaterial to the victims. How large a percentage among the majority participate in this persecution likewise is - immaterial to the fact that persecution takes place with impunity.

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521 North Pine Street
Mount Prospect, IL 60056-2056
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My concern was heightened as multiple police officials told me they were facing the same problems faced by their predecessors and that their successors will face because no government does anything that empowers them to change this terrible situation. And all of this makes the immediate threat facing over 12 million Bangladeshi Hindus serious.

During every major Bangladeshi election, [Hindus have been victims of targeted violence](#). If the perpetrators came solely from the ranks of radical Islamists, it would be a simple problem to cure. If the perpetrators were acting against the interests of parties in power, the latter would respond in force. If it was something that Bangladeshi leaders wanted to prevent, they would have taken action to prevent it. What actions have they taken to prevent Hindus from facing a similar fate this year, as national elections loom?

Although Bangladeshi officials have given me “assurances that everything will be done” to prevent the violence, Hindus there tell me they’ve heard that before, and they have not *seen* anything different this year. In March, I urged the Hindu community there to work with local police on self-defense, especially early warning of attacks. When I returned in September, I was told that the police rebuffed suggestions. There already has been serious anti-Hindu violence in Rangpur district. Muslim leaders there encouraged a crowd to avenge their faith, claiming that one of the Hindu villagers posted a statement on Facebook “insulting the prophet Mohammad.” The accusation turned out to be false. The alleged perpetrator had long ago left the village and, regardless, did not have the skills needed to leave the alleged post. That, however, is beside the point as there is no way to normalize such a violent and unrestrained reaction to the allegation. That reaction involved “tens of thousands” of attackers overrunning the village and committing multiple crimes, including beatings, arson, and looting. Some villagers have alleged sexual assault as well, but I have not been able to confirm that as of this writing. I can confirm criminals responsible for the attack have not been arrested, nor do members the Hindu community expect them to be. The Rangpur incident shows why Bangladesh’s Hindus live in fear and expect no justice from this or any other Bangladeshi government.

Some members of the current government have asked me to “give them time” and wait until after the elections to address the matter of anti-Hindu persecution; but whether or not I can wait means nothing. Bangladesh’s Hindus cannot. That this government—a group of decent people—understand this to be a political matter only underscores our moral obligation to act. For we know that when governments enable human rights violations, they cease to be “internal matters” and require action by others. So what must we do?

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The Bangladeshi government is correct in calling itself a friend, and we owe it to our friends to help them overcome their inability to stop these atrocities. While doing it, we help them stop the [growing power of radical Islamists in Bangladesh](#). More than the right thing to do, it also in the interest of both the United States and Bangladesh.

In 2016, Bangladeshi ambassador to the United States, Mohammad Ziauddin, admitted to former Congressman Dold and me that Hindus did face persecution in his country, then added that it was too poor to do anything about it. Dold's response: "We want to help you solve your problems. We can be most effective by focusing first on one specific thing: preventing further election time violence against Hindus in Bangladesh.

Our previous ineffectiveness with Bangladesh starts with our willingness to stop at hopeful words, like those "assurances" I was given. From my discussions with police on the ground, constitutional lawyers in Bangladesh, and others, it is clear that the Bangladeshi government has the resources to stop the election-time violence. I am not sure it has the will. Political considerations appear to trump moral ones.

The United States must make it explicit that it will hold the Bangladeshi government responsible for sectarian violence both before and after the election; that words are not enough. The United States will judge the Bangladeshis by actions and effect.

At the very least, we should tell the Bangladeshi government we expect several actions.

- Those responsible for the Rangpur pogrom and other attacks are arrested and prosecuted, and this would include organizers and inciters, not only participants.
- Police and other government officials that participate in cover ups or otherwise do not take action against perpetrators be sacked.
- And that it make clear to all that the government of Bangladesh will not allow these actions.

If the government claims that it does not have the resources to take these actions, the United States can help. It is key to a successful Bangladeshi economy that is inordinately dependent on garment exports; US citizens are its best customers. US importers/retailers will not want to be associated with a government that refuses to stop sectarian violence. There also is bi-partisan precedent for considering religious freedom and human rights in trade and other foreign policy: the International Religious Freedom Act (passed during the Clinton administration) and foreign policy actions of the Trump administration.

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- Tariffs can be imposed on Bangladeshi imports and put in a fund to help Bangladesh enforce its own laws and constitutional principles. Aid can be withheld and earmarked for the same purpose to help save Bangladeshi lives.
- Bangladesh is also one of the largest contributors of United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping troops, funding largely by US taxpayers. Is our own government serving us well if it uses our money to enable persecution? Perhaps if Ambassador Ziauddin is right, we should revoke those peacekeeping positions so the personnel can be used to end sectarian violence at home.

It will have an impact. In 2007, I was in Bangladeshi during a military coup. After the coup, I spoke with some members of the military who told me that fear of losing those peacekeeping troops was the final motive for their action.

With the trade and peacekeeping items on the table, Bangladesh likely will take the action needed to stop the immediate violence against Hindus an unprecedented and courageous action by the current government there, and the people of the United States will have been partners in it. It will usher in a new era in US-Bangladesh relations and create new dynamics in regional cooperation in fighting radicals.

Not long ago, we had very public debate here about who we are as a nation and what that means. The Saudis had murdered a journalist at their Istanbul consulate, and Saudi officials were culpable. But Saudi Arabia is a very important ally, both financially and geo-politically. The question was: Do we take a stand against our friends' human rights violations, or do we look the other way *because* they are our friends? In the end, we *had* to stand for human rights, even if doing so would anger a friend. In the end, we decided that the United States of America could not *be* the United States of America if we looked the other way because it served our immediate interests.

We face the same challenge today. Another friend has enabled massive human rights violations for decades. In *this* case, however, not merely one person has been victimized, but millions have; and millions *remain* at risk. Are their lives any less precious than that of the Saudi journalist? In contrast to last month's hue and cry over Mr. Khashoggi, stands our decades-long silence about these millions. Thus far, we *have* looked the other way. So, what are we going to do? Do we help our Bangladeshi friends do the right thing, or do we deny our basic American decency with a wink and a nod and be complicit in the destruction of Bangladesh's Hindus? Thank you.