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Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[10 May 2013]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Religious freedom and protection of religious minorities in the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Amid rising political conflicts, violence against religious minorities sensibly has increased in the People's Republic of Bangladesh in the year 2013. The Hindu and Buddhist communities became victims of a political conflict on the question of impunity for war crimes which have been committed in the independence struggle in 1971. Since February 5 the radical Islamist movement Hefajat-e-Islam and Bangladesh's largest Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami whose leaders were on trial for war crimes have been launching public protests against the special tribunal.

Hundreds of thousands of supporters joined the protests calling for the implementation of a plan of 13 demands to achieve the Islamization of Bangladesh. But many demands were contrary to the constitution of the country. They called for a new blasphemy law, imposing death penalty for anyone guilty for blasphemy. Furthermore they wanted to restrict access for women to public life and prohibiting them from working with men. Islamic education should be imposed and all cultural activities should be banned which could hurt the religious feelings of Muslims. Christians, Hindus and Buddhists felt deeply troubled by the perspectives of even more restrictions of religious freedom. Therefore the religious minorities have called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to impose no new legislation on blasphemy.

We are delighted that the Prime Minister has refused on April 8 to promote a new blasphemy law. But despite her public commitment that everybody has "the right to practise his religion freely" and "to try to protect every religious sentiment" the situation of religious minorities and press freedom in regard to religion sharply has worsened in the last 12 years since the Prime Minister came to power. Immediately after the elections in 2001, there were massive, concerted attacks on Hindus by supporters of the new coalition government of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its fundamentalist allies. Hundreds of Hindus died, were raped or forcibly converted to Islam. Thousands have fled to neighbouring India.

Even today the harassment of independent Bloggers and religious minority people continues despite the call for religious freedom by the Prime Minister. In February 2013 blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider was killed outside his home after he had called for the execution of Islamist leaders for war crimes. In April four bloggers were arrested for harming religious sentiment, one of the four has been attacked in January 2013. The arrests prompted eight blog operators to black out their websites in protests against the deliberate restrictions of press freedom.

The wave of violence escalated after the Jamaat-e-Islami leader Delwar Hossain Saveedi has been sentenced by a special war crimes tribunal on February 28, 2013, to be hanged for crimes during the Bangladesh Liberation War. Though there was no obvious link between the trial and the religious minority, Hindus immediately after the verdict have been attacked across the whole country by radical Islamists. Scores of shops and houses belonging to the Hindu community have been burned down, leaving hundreds of people homeless. The attacks on temples, houses and shops were well planned. It is shocking that they have been targeted simply for their religion and with the purpose to create conflicts with India and further communal clashes in neighbouring countries. At least 50 temples, 1500 houses and 300 businesses have been damaged.

Buddhist communities also became victims of large scale violence. Statues of Buddha and Buddhist temples were vandalized. This is not the first times that radical Islamists have been trying to provoke clashes between Buddhists and Muslims. After clashes in June/July

2012 in neighbouring Myanmar radical Islamist organized revenge attacks on Buddhist temples and institutions in Chittagong region in Summer 2012. This wave of well-planned attacks has led to more violence against Muslims in Myanmar in autumn 2012.

Despite several arrests of radical Islamists there is a widespread feeling among minority people to lack protection by the authorities. Many Christians, Hindus and Buddhists feel unsafe in Bangladesh and are preparing to flee the country.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to urge Bangladesh:

- to ensure religious freedom for anybody and protection for religious minorities,
 - to end impunity for violence against religious minorities,
 - to guarantee press freedom in regard to religion,
 - to ensure the freedom on Internet and the press freedom of bloggers.
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