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INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ROUNDTABLE SIDE EVENT
BANGLADESH HINDU, BUDDHIST, & CHRISTIAN UNITY COUNCIL
DR. RICHARD BENKIN
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For decades, Bangladesh has gotten away with atrocities against Hindus and other minorities in an effort to rid the land of non-Muslims first, and ultimately those Muslims who do not practice their faith in a way acceptable to the government and its radical allies. If *we* do not stop enabling this, it will mean the end of Hindus in Bangladesh, and signal radicals *everywhere* that we will not oppose their ethnic cleansing *anywhere*.

Bangladesh's ability to engage in ethnic cleansing without facing sanction or even approbation for it represents a dismal failure of those nations and organizations that consider themselves to be the defenders of human rights. That must stop if we will be like those "good Europeans" who closed their shutters so they wouldn't have to see their Jewish neighbors being taken to Nazi concentration camps.

Five major factors keep up this cowardice:

1. Governments, international media and pundits, the human rights industry, and others saw Bangladesh as a new kind of Muslim nation when it rebelled from Pakistan in 1971: democratic and moderate, with leaders who guaranteed minority rights. Of course, those elements were true on paper only, and those experts are committed to maintaining the narrative or be forced to admit how "un-expert" they are.
2. Unlike Pakistan, China, and others, Bangladesh does not do it themselves, but rather empower even reward others and refuse to prosecute these crimes against Hindus. Those experts seem incapable of making this conceptual leap (did I say leap, make that conceptual baby steps), and allow the Bangladeshis to believe they can fool us.
3. The third is ideological: an obsessive focus on India and other democracies where minorities flourish despite challenges, where the law is actually implemented; to the exclusion of real atrocities in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries.
4. People who continue to act against the fact by pretending that the Awami League is any better in this regard than the BNP. It is not, and Professor Abul Barkat, mentioned earlier demonstrated that both are equally guilty of stealing Hindu land based on the Vested Property Act. If anything, it is worse under Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League.
5. The lack of activism by most Hindus. As one US Congressman asked me: "If the situation is so dire, why don't we hear from our Hindu constituents about it?"

And one more obstacle to justice: people who believe that words are an adequate substitute for action.

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So, how do we change this?

First, understand that the Bangladeshi government will never do the right thing simply because it is the right thing; to assume otherwise is naïve. But it will do the right thing if we make it in its *interest* to do so, or more to the point, we make it contrary to its interests *not* to do the right thing.

While Bangladeshis are rightly proud of their economic success, graduating from the category of least developed countries, their economy remains inordinately dependent on one thing—garment exports—and we hold the key because Americans are their best customers. No retailer wants to be seen by the public as supporting ethnic cleansing, and while purchase decisions are non-governmental, the US government has the moral duty to publicize Bangladesh's complicity in the murder of millions, especially since they already have the data. They just need to place justice ahead of politics and prestige. I appreciate the presence of State Department and USCIRF today. Unfortunately, both USCIRF and the State Department are supposed to highlight these things but both have been **incomprehensibly timid** in forcing Bangladesh to face the consequences of its action.

Additionally, I refer to the interfaith letter just sent to our ambassador in Dhaka, with Senate and House copies, to defend human rights attorney, Rabindra Ghosh, who has been beaten *again* for representing his minority client; trying to get simple due process. I want *my* government—the government and country I love, the country and government with which I am associated—to take the appropriate action and not ignore this crime as it has too frequently in the past. Let the Bangladeshis know their best customers are having doubts about their integrity so they act to protect their interests. That would be a good start—securing justice in one case and initiating a new era in stopping the greater injustice.

After that, it's up to the rest of us to let retailers like Walmart know that it is supporting murder and that we won't. Not a boycott, but moral decisions made by informed consumers. How many people here, concerned though you might be, are wearing garments with the label, "Made in Bangladesh." By *not* doing that, you can make a difference that will save lives!

It's no coincidence that today is the 75th anniversary of the Nuremburg Trials of Nazi war criminals. Let's see if our government can be true to its lessons by doing at least this much.

Thank you.