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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1305)

[Translation]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Good afternoon.

Today is February 24, 2015, and I welcome you to the 57th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[English]

We are televised today and, colleagues, what we're discussing today is the developing situation of religious minorities in Bangladesh.

We have with us one witness at the moment. We're hoping that we'll have the second witness, but unfortunately, a transportation issue relating to the VIA Rail train from Montreal has caused him to be late. I look over at my colleague Mr. Benskin, who looks very knowing on this issue. Hopefully our witness will arrive before the end of the meeting.

This is a little different from our normal procedure. Normally we would have both witnesses, then go to questions. It may be that we'll hear from one witness, go to questions, and have to make a further adjustment as time goes on. We'll see what happens and play it a little bit by ear.

Mr. Roy, who is the president of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council is with us today. Mr. Roy is going to begin, and then whether we go to the other witness or to questions will depend upon what happens.

Mr. Roy, please feel free to begin.

Mr. Kirit Sinha Roy (President, Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council): My name is Kirit Sinha Roy and I am the chief executive of the Ontario chapter of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, or BHBCUC. I'm a former newspaperman who fled to Canada in 1992 and was received as a refugee.

The council is a secular and non-partisan organization founded in Bangladesh in 1988 by Major-General C.R. Dutta, a Pakistani army officer who defected to join the Mukti Bahini, the liberation forces, and is considered one of the heroes of the 1971 Bangladesh freedom struggle. The two co-presidents were Bodhipal Mohathero and Mr. T.D. Rosario. The Ontario chapter is relatively new.

We are grateful to the chair of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, Mr. Scott Reid, MP for the Conservative Party, for the invitation to appear today, and to the vice-chairman, Wayne Marston, MP, member of the official opposition, and his policy adviser, Thomas Allen, for their active support and encouragement for this hearing.

This is not the first time we have appeared before a House committee. In 2004 we were invited by the sometimes Liberal MP Mr. David Kilgour to appear before this committee. Our message to you today, I regret to say, has not changed significantly. The religious and ethnic minority populations are at greater risk today than a decade ago.

The parliamentary Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami, existed even then, but has since been bolstered by the meteoric rise of shadowy extra-parliamentary Islamist forces such as Hefajat-e-Islam, which operates through a huge network of unregulated madrasahs throughout Bangladesh, whose students and alumni can be mobilized through the skilful use of social media and the madrasah network.

We have made a written submission, and we'll make a confidential submission too, but there are a few points that we would like to bring to your attention: first, minority rights and the constitution; second, the decline in the minority Hindu population; third, minorities as second-class citizens; and fourth, violence against minorities, such as land grabs, attacks on lives and property, and, most importantly, abduction of girls and women, rape, forced conversions, and forced marriages.

First, minority rights have been a contested principle since the foundation of Bangladesh. The constitution adopted on November 4, 1972, enshrined in article 41 the principle of religious pluralism and freedom of religion. In 1977 the military dictator Ziaur Rahman removed the secular principle from the constitution; it's called the fifth amendment. In 1988 another military dictator, Hossain Mohammad Ershad, declared Islam the state religion. The official name remains the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Second, Hindus are now an endangered species in Bangladesh, which, even as East Pakistan, had a Muslim majority population. The Hindu population started to drop drastically after the partition of 1947 and again after the war of independence in 1971. In 1975, Hindus were 15.6% of the population, but were 9.5% in 2010. Some say they are barely 8% of the population now. According to the latest census, the Buddhists stand at 0.7%, and the Christians are the smallest group at 0.3%.

•(1310)

There are two reasons for the decline. One is the enemy property law, later renamed the Vested Property Law, which dates from 1965. The other is that, for rich and poor, the constant threat of Islamist-inspired violence against them, their families, their institutions and places of worship often becomes unbearable. Those who have the means leave for India or overseas. Others remain and continue to live in fear.

Third, minorities are, at best, second-class citizens. Religious and ethnic minorities are at a disadvantage in accessing higher education or employment in the civil service. Successive governments have refused to provide statistics on the number of minorities in the civil service, but we believe there are very few. The military and security services are devoid of minorities. The only professions open to the educated members of the minorities are the liberal professions.

In January of this year, Mr. Surendra Kumar Sinha, a Hindu, was appointed chief justice, a very small but significant step in the right direction. Of the present 350 members of Parliament in Bangladesh, there are less than 20 members of Parliament who belong to minority religious or ethnic communities. Minorities, we regret to say, are invisible in the eyes of a good number of NGOs, many of which enjoy the support of overseas donors and governments.

Finally, violence against minorities is widespread. Almost every day, both the English and the vernacular media report at least one violent incident against some minority group member. The Hotline Human Rights Trust, a Bangladeshi NGO, believes that such incidents are often under-reported. The worst form of violence is the denial of justice.

Professor Abul Barkat, an economist, estimates that Hindus lost 220,000 acres of land and houses between 2001 and 2006. Temples are magnets for Islamist-inspired mob violence. The images in Hindu temples are decorated with gold, a very sought after commodity in South Asia. Buddhist art and artifacts also command high prices in the world's art markets. The most ugly and destructive of the pogroms against Hindus and Buddhists was in 2012 and 2013. It occurred in Hathazari near Chittagong when, according to many local Muslim witnesses, members of Hefajat-e-Islam, the Shibir, and the Jamaat-e-Islami incited Muslim mobs to attack Hindu and Buddhist homes, temples, and other property. Ancient Buddhist temples and Hindu temples were looted and burned to the ground.

I mention this incident because it has a direct link with the rise of Hefajat-e-Islam. According to the Bangladesh *Daily Star*, which ran a cover story on the incident, the Hathazari incident was the starting point of religious terrorism of Jamaat in recent years.

•(1315)

A favourite tactic used by Islamists is to spread a rumour that the Prophet or the Quran had been insulted by a Hindu on Facebook to mobilize mobs to block roads and traffic and start on an orgy of arson, looting, and assaults.

Finally, I would like to inform you about the unique problem of abduction and rape, leading to forced conversions and forced marriages. Minority women and girls are the most vulnerable of all because they enjoy greater freedom of movement. Sexual assault and rape are still considered very shameful in South Asia among all

communities, and victims get little comfort by going to the police. The police are corrupt and untrustworthy and likely to mistreat the victim.

Abductions of women and underage teens often end in forced conversions and marriages. There are no specific laws banning forced marriages.

Abductions are usually not taken seriously by the local police. There are often notices in the vernacular press saying, "I AB of XY and daughter of CD have converted from Hinduism to Islam. My new name is EF. I am now the wife of GH." This is a sure sign that this is a case of forced conversion and marriage. Unfortunately, there are no statistics about forced conversions and marriages.

We are pleased to report that the systemic violence against the minorities has abated since the end of the last year. It seems the lowland area minorities are breathing a bit easier but the Adivasis or aboriginal peoples are still suffering.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Roy.

I see that our second witness, Dr. Aditya Dewan, has arrived.

Welcome, Doctor.

We've just heard from our first witness. We'd now like to hear your testimony. Then we will go to questions from the members of the committee. I would just encourage you, if possible, to keep your remarks as short as possible in order to allow time for questions.

Thank you.

•(1320)

Dr. Aditya Dewan (International Council for the Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts): Thank you, Chairperson.

Honourable Chair of the subcommittee, vice-chairs, members of the committee, and all the people who are present here, I will be very brief. I also submitted my brief, three or four days ago, and I hope you already have a copy.

First of all, briefly, I want to introduce myself. My name is Aditya Kumar Dewan. I am a professor of anthropology at Concordia University. Also, I did my Ph.D. at McGill, and during that period my professor was Doctor Cotler here, and from the Governor General I received my doctorate degree at convocation at McGill in 1990. I am fortunate to have met these two distinguished personalities in Canada. Since then, I have been teaching at Concordia University.

The main reason for my presence here is the International Council for the Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This is the organization that represents all overseas indigenous peoples throughout the world: in Australia, in America, here, and in other places. I am the president of that organization.

The reason I have organized and founded this organization is to do a human rights campaign for the Chittagong Hill Tracts indigenous people. There have been constant human rights violations in the area since Bangladesh independence. We know that there have been countless human rights violations taking place. Anyone can check with Amnesty International and other human rights organizations. They have all the reports.

I also got today the report of February 18 from Amnesty International. They have come out with a damning report about the silencing of the indigenous people. The Ministry of Home Affairs sent a memo saying that indigenous people will not be allowed to talk to foreigners. Foreigners are banned from entering into the CHT. Not only foreigners, but Bangladeshi individuals and organizations are not allowed to enter without permission from the army and the military.

There is well-documented evidence of the actions of looting and the frequent attacks on indigenous people. Every year we see two or three attacks committed by the army and the Bengali settlers. That's what led us to organize a campaign appealing to the foreign governments to stop this. How can we stop these countless and enormous human rights violations from taking place? All sorts of violations are taking place. I will not list all of them.

Our main purpose is to let you know what is happening there. I will use one phrase: we are born free but are everywhere in chains. That's what Rousseau said during the French Revolution. That's what you can compare this to: we are not allowed or able to freely move in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Personally, I have two incidents I want to tell you about today. One of them is the Bhusanchara massacre. My village was completely taken over and 400 people were killed. It is still under occupation by the Bengali settlers. Another one happened in 1980. That was the Kaukhali massacre. The army convened a meeting in the temple, and when the people got together, they gunned down 400 people. My sister's family and other villagers were gunned down. After gunning them down, the settlers moved in, setting fires, burning, and looting. Everything went on. These are two of the serious incidents. I am not going to tell you about any other kinds of things.

●(1325)

I don't have time to list all of them, but just briefly, one of them is denial of the ethnic identity of indigenous people. The Bangladesh government says that we don't have any indigenous people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. Of course, when we went to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Bangladesh authorities sent a representative saying that the forum had no business saying that there were indigenous people in Bangladesh. I also want to mention that when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina came to the United Nations to address some of the nations, Ban Ki-moon asked her what was happening to her indigenous people. Her answer was, "No, we don't have any indigenous people: we are the indigenous people." To that Ban Ki-moon laughed and made a joke: "It's very good that we have indigenous people like you in the United Nations."

That's one thing. Since then, we have been doing all kinds of lobbying in other places.

As well, the army has created many armed groups among the indigenous people. They are fighting among themselves. The army does not arrest them or take them to court. The army and the settlers have complete impunity for what they are doing. A culture of impunity has developed. They are not answering to anyone else. Chittagong Hill Tracts is completely under occupation, just like any other place being occupied by an army.

Why is this happening? This is peacetime. We are not doing anything. We are not protesting. Nothing is being done there. So why is there so much secrecy? Is it that they want to hide crimes by not allowing foreigners to listen? One possibility is that if they do anything wrong, probably it will get out, and the Bangladesh government is very much afraid of publicity. At the same time, they are afraid of having problems with their foreign aid.

A possible reason for so much secrecy, for outside people not being allowed to go in there, is that there might be some training of Islamic terrorists. Chittagong Hill Tracts is one of the mountainous regions; it's very hilly and mountainous. There are rumours—I don't have the proof—that there might be some training, because people are coming from Burma, from the Rohingya situation, and there are other groups. Money is pouring in from the Middle East. An increasing number of madrasahs, religious schools, have been established. When any riots occur or any incidents happen, they hire people from outside the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and pay them as hired goons.

Basically, I should call this essay "Genocide Bangladesh Style". That means it's not just like Rwanda or Bosnia in terms of the kind of killing going on. It's the slow demise of the indigenous people, the taking over of our land, so that people outside don't know anything. The army is very much protecting themselves this way. We went to the Department of Peacekeeping Operations at the United Nations. They hired 10,000 Bangladesh army in the peacekeeping force at the United Nations. We told them that your people, the Bangladesh peacekeepers, when they come back, violate human rights in the area—raping, killing, and everything.

This brings me to intention. Honourable members all know that the United Nations definition of genocide in article II is that it's any deliberate attempt to kill, with an intent to destroy in whole or in part.

●(1330)

This is exactly what is happening. Intentionally, they are trying to completely bury all these human rights violations. At the same time, there was a peace agreement signed on December 2, 1997. In the 17 years that have passed, the government has not even implemented the peace agreed upon between the government and the insurgents in 1997. Sixty thousand refugees from India have been repatriated and still have not been given back their lands that are occupied by the settlers, the Bengali people.

Most probably I am out of time. I'll give answers if you have questions. Thank you very much. I am so fortunate that I have been able to come here and tell my stories of what is happening there. In 1984 I sought refugee status in Canada. The Canadian government gave me refuge here. I was not able to go back because I did my doctoral thesis at McGill on the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

My conclusion, my recommendation, is as I've said. The Canadian government provides a large amount of foreign aid to Bangladesh. I'm not saying that you use that aid as a weapon or as tied aid, but I'm saying that if you want to develop and promote human rights and democracy in a developing country like Bangladesh, it has to go with this, side by side, this integrating and respecting of the rights of religious minorities everywhere. The Canadian government can have much power to influence the Bangladesh government. Bangladesh is a sovereign country. They will argue this, but you have enough room to promote democracy and human rights in the areas where you provide foreign aid.

Basically, I give thanks to all of you here. I'm so fortunate that I was able to do this. We are a small number of people. We are unable to reach people and are unable to send news to the outside. In Bangladesh, if a ferry capsizes or if there's a snakebite, it gets attention from the major news media, but something's going on there that has never come up in the major news media, on the CBC, CTV, or whatever. We are completely blacked out because the Bangladesh government has so many tools of influence in many areas. But we are unable to do that.

Again, I thank all of you. I will end my statement here.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Colleagues, in the past when we've had two witnesses and I give a specific time for questions, the second answer frequently puts us well into overtime. On the last occasion, we didn't wrap up until about 20 minutes after we were supposed to. In the interest of keeping things under control, I'm going to ask each person to place one question. Then we'll see if we get one answer or two to the question.

We'll begin with you, Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Roy and Mr. Dewan, thank you very much for your testimony.

Mr. Roy, are you a refugee from Bangladesh as well?

Dr. Aditya Dewan: Yes, I got refugee status in 1984.

Mr. David Sweet: Yes, I know you are, Mr. Dewan, but Mr. Roy, is that the case?

Mr. Kirit Sinha Roy: Yes, in 1992 I was a refugee.

Mr. David Sweet: I see. Both of you are. Can you help all of us here to understand? You're talking about indigenous minorities: Buddhists, Christians, Ahmadiyya—

A voice: Hindus.

Mr. David Sweet: Hindus, but there are Ahmadi Muslims as well, I believe, who are part of the religious minorities that are being

persecuted. All of this is happening within the context of great political strife going on right now, so it's a real polarization.

My understanding is that the government goes back and forth between the AL and the BNP. Do both of those parties, when they're in government, act the same way towards indigenous people and Christian minorities, or is it different when one of them is in government or not?

• (1335)

Mr. Kirit Sinha Roy: As far as I know, for minorities like Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians, the BNP and their allies—I mean their Islamist allies, Jamaat-e-Islami, Hefajat-e-Islam, and all of these—are the worst kind. In 2001, about 200 women were raped in broad daylight during the tenure of the BNP government. Now it's not stopped at all. The thing is that when anything happens, this government takes the initiative to arrest or to do something—but only after the incident happens. It's not to protect those minorities; after anything happens in the village or subdivisions or subdistricts, after the incident happens, then the police go there and arrest two or three people. But none of the perpetrators are brought to justice.

That's the irony of this country, Bangladesh.

Dr. Aditya Dewan: May I say something?

Mr. David Sweet: Yes.

Dr. Aditya Dewan: In terms of our indigenous people or religious minorities, I think both parties have said that there is no difference between them. My perception is that, in fact, Bangladesh is a kind of failed state. What I'm saying here is that the political parties, one after another, have come to rely completely on the army.

In 2009, when there was an election, a caretaker government had to supervise the elections. The United Nations peacekeeping department threatened the army that if they didn't support that, they wouldn't hire the peacekeeping force. Then the army supported the caretaker government, the election was held, and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina came into power.

My guess is that the political parties are very weak. They are very much dependent on the army and on government bureaucrats. They are basically subordinated to those; they have to listen. On the indigenous issue, the army went to Sheikh Hasina on the fact that, with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, there would be a harmful outcome if they called indigenous people indigenous. So the government said that the term "indigenous" should not be used. The government had used the term in many of their documents, had used it everywhere, but after the army pressed them on it, they banned the term from being used. They erased the term "indigenous" from all government documents.

This is exactly what makes the army the more powerful one inside. I believe the army cannot be controlled, because all the parties are hungry for power all the time. This is my assumption as an academic observer; this is what's happening there.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Chair, before I ask my question, I just want to note for the record that Matthew Kellway, the member for Beaches—East York, is here, as is Dan Harris, the member for Scarborough Southwest, observing the debate. I thought it would be nice to put them on the record.

Gentlemen, thank you so much for being here.

Mr. Dewan, whenever people are being pushed off their land, with the kind of murders of indigenous people that are happening there, quite often it is framed as a religious activity when in fact they're being displaced for the land or the minerals that are in the land. Is that the case?

Dr. Aditya Dewan: It's not exactly for minerals or any other cases; I think the army has a corporate interest. They have a very big business. I have all the documents and the research paper that came out. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts there are 60 people per one army personnel. In any other part of Bangladesh, there are 17,000 people per one army personnel.

Actually, there is international development going on. Australians have road development projects. There are Japanese projects. Huge foreign aid projects are going on. Everything is supervised by the army.

• (1340)

Mr. Wayne Marston: So it does sound like that is at least part of it.

Dr. Aditya Dewan: Yes, they manage everything.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Do I have more time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Under the circumstances, yes.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you so much.

Mr. Roy, in your opinion, is the targeting of the Buddhists linked to the situation facing the Rohingyas in Burma?

Mr. Kirit Sinha Roy: The Rohingyas, to my knowledge, are a little bit unsettled by the army. The Government of Bangladesh was threatened by Japan that if their Buddhist people were attacked, they'd be in big trouble and they wouldn't help them. The Rohingyas now know just what.... In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, there's the army, and in the other part of Chittagong Hill Tracts, it's all Islamists. They have madrasahs. Not only do they have madrasahs, but they also have training camps. They export these Islamists to other parts of Bangladesh.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, witnesses, for your time and your presentations.

According to the 2011 census, Sunni Muslims constitute 90% and Hindus make up 9.5% of the total population. The remainder of the population is predominantly Christian and Theravada Buddhist.

According to the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, a number of Islamists are involved in attacks against minority communities, especially Hindus. Since the start of 2015, at least six Hindus have been killed and three have been raped. Seven

temples, 54 homes, and 84 Hindu idols have been attacked and vandalized.

What is the motivation behind these attacks? Is it to drive the minorities out of the country, or, as some government and other observers claim, is it due to motivations that have little to do with religious beliefs or affiliations?

Mr. Kirit Sinha Roy: I think you've got the point: it's to drive all the minorities from that part.

I can tell you a story. Our national mosque is Baitul Mukarram. The chief priest of the mosque once said that in Muslim countries, only Muslims should stay, that those who are of other religions there have to convert to Islam, and that in the democratic countries, their people will go and establish their rights over there.

Naturally, these Jamaats or other Islamic parties, their goal is to.... I'll tell you. In one family, if one girl is raped, the entire community will deviate from this family. That family then has no choice but to leave the country. That way, they are keeping two things in mind: land grabs and minority girls.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Mr. Dewan, do you have anything to say on this?

Dr. Aditya Dewan: Concerning minorities in general, if you look at the figures in 1947 when India was divided into Pakistan and India, you see that a significant number, about 32%, of minorities were Hindus and others. Right now, that is down to almost 8%. The figure speaks for itself in regard to how much persecution of minorities is going on.

They have different methods for false acquisition or for any other things. They state that the people "initiate rioting". When rioting occurs, the people are attacked, all their things are burned, and the Hindus leave for India. Then their lands are taken over. This is one method.

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, it's the same thing. Our indigenous population fled to Mizoram in India, and to Tripura. Also, we have around 100,000 indigenous people in Arunachal, India, which was called NEFA, the North-East Frontier Agency. They have been there many years and still do not have citizenship. They went there in 1964. When the land was flooded by the hydroelectric plant, 100,000 people were displaced and 50% of the best agricultural land was under water. After that, we don't have any land. Where will we have land? Where is the room for the new settlers?

We have no quarrel with any other Bengalis. We have been living there side by side for hundreds of years and we have had no problem. The problems started when Bangladesh became independent and the Arab people, under false pretenses, took over the land from neighbouring areas. There's a reign of terror in the area. We don't get any justice. We don't go to anything, anywhere, as we don't get any kind of justice. As you know, that court system is not like it is here. This means what I have said: there is no rule of law.

The rule of law is the key to keeping the whole country together. Anyone here gets justice, through the media, through the justice system, or from anywhere. The rule of law is not there in Bangladesh. That's my whole point. Everything is politically and religiously motivated to destroy whole communities. This is what is happening in Bangladesh. It's a very sad story.

• (1345)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Grewal.

We'll go now to Professor Cotler.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): I want to thank our witnesses for being here.

I want to say hello again to you, Dr. Dewan. I appreciate your being here.

I have two questions, really, which arise from your testimony.

You mentioned that the Canadian government provides considerable aid to Bangladesh, which should mean that the Canadian government would have leverage with respect to influencing the Government of Bangladesh.

Also, the second point you mention, which is a rather painful point, is that the plight of the indigenous people in Bangladesh is simply not on the international radar screen. You don't read about it. One doesn't hear about it. That helps to nurture the culture of impunity, and frankly, that helps to encourage the violations of the rule of law, because not only is there no world that is watching, but in fact it's not on any radar screen.

How can we, as the Canadian government or Parliament, influence the Bangladesh government, given that we do provide aid? How do we influence them to protect the indigenous population, to respect the rule of law, to end the culture of impunity, and to respect the peace agreement—all the things you mentioned? That's number one.

Number two, which is not unrelated to it, how can we make this case in public opinion—even public opinion here in Canada—given that one set of violations cancels out another set of violations? In a world in which everybody is talking about ISIS and Boko Haram, etc., how do we give expression to your particular very painful situation?

Dr. Aditya Dewan: Thank you, sir.

According to my understanding, there is of course a lot of money channelled through CIDA to Bangladesh. I don't have any figures for how much, or for how much is invested, or for how much aid money goes to the Chittagong Hills. I don't have any figures because I was unable to get anything of that kind.

Of course, as a donor-dependent country, Bangladesh most fears publicity. That's number one. Number two is if the aid donor has some kind of influence.

This is our responsibility as Canadians. I am also very proud as a Canadian citizen right now that our moral and ethical responsibility is to promote respect for human rights in an area: if you are receiving my aid, democracy and human rights go side by side as a package. We must promote human rights. Indigenous peoples and religious minorities should be respected, just like we do any others here.

That's what I really want the Canadian government to say to the people. I'm not saying that we stop the aid. It's a very poor country, one of the poorest countries in the world, with a population of 150 million right now in an area of 55,000 square miles. Within our capacity and our aid money, of course, we can have influence there.

Another thing you have asked me about is how we can promote.... It is basically a kind of media coverage that we are unable to do there, where there is a lot of menace for the media. Here, they are unable or don't want to do that, because we have such insignificant numbers. The attitude I find here is, "Why should we care?" We are here all the time, but in fact, all of our movements are hijacked by things like ISIS and Islamic terrorism. We have been waiting for this moment. It has been postponed many times. I am very indebted to Dr. Bose. She was trying to help organize this meeting for us.

You will remember that I gave you one example. I went to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2011. I had a press conference there. The media were there. We gave testimony. There was huge coverage. We also took part in speeches and rallies in front of the United Nations building, so we had some coverage.

One day, a Bengali woman came to me. In New York she was a local member of the Awami League. She asked why I was doing all those things and asked to talk about it, saying that they didn't want publicity. She invited me to meet with Bangladesh's ambassador to the United Nations. She said that she was going to arrange a dinner or something like that for me, and then I understood that they are really very afraid of publicity. This is probably one of the two things that makes the Bangladesh government listen in regard to what has to be done.

• (1350)

The problem I can see, as I said before, is that the army is so powerful, and they are not going to do anything. They know very well that if they go on rampaging or killing on a larger scale it will be in the newspaper and other places. So they are doing slowly something called creeping genocide. I have here the IWGIA's "Militarization in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh—The Slow Demise of the Region's Indigenous Peoples". If anybody is interested, I can send you an electronic copy. I have the document, if anybody's interested. I have 15 copies here. You can pick them up. Most of the documents are here.

Surprisingly—I'm so happy—on February 18 we got documents from Amnesty International about the silencing of the indigenous people of Bangladesh. They are not allowed to talk to foreigners, not even to Bangladeshi organizations and individuals. This is very....

I am saying that enough is enough. This is what I have to say.

Thank you, sir.

• (1355)

The Chair: At the end of the meeting, perhaps you could bring those documents up to the clerk and leave them with him. He'll make sure that the members of the committee get to see them. Thank you.

Let's go now to Mr. Hillyer, please.

Mr. Jim Hillyer (Lethbridge, CPC): With regard to the country of Bangladesh not wanting publicity—they like the fact that they're low on the radar screen—do you think, besides putting the pressure on with our foreign aid, etc., visits from parliamentarians would make a difference?

Dr. Aditya Dewan: Of course it would make a difference. It would be more powerful and forceful if parliamentarians could raise this issue in the House of Commons. Any kind of discussions would very greatly help. That's my view.

Once it became known, too, they would think, “Well, we can't keep them silent anymore.” If some of the actions taken against the indigenous people became known, and reached the top in many important places, they would think about that. I think it would make a great difference.

Mr. Jim Hillyer: Thank you.

The Chair: You can go with more than one question if the answer is that brief.

Mr. Jim Hillyer: No, that's good.

The Chair: In that case, we will go to Mr. Benskin.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Thank you, gentlemen, for your presence here.

One of the things about participating in this committee is the things you learn. I would first like to apologize for my own ignorance in terms of the plight of indigenous people in Bangladesh. I guess I suffer from the limitations of western existence in thinking that the problems we see are the only ones that exist. I thank you for bringing your situation to our attention. I'm glad this committee was able to facilitate that.

I guess my question comes on the heels of Professor Cotler's. I'm particularly concerned and fascinated to a certain extent by what you were saying in terms of what the government does in striking the term “indigenous people” from all their documents, as if striking those words from the documents make you non-existent.

How are you referred to, then, in terms of your existence, your actual existence, in Bangladesh? Could you elaborate on some of the work you're doing in order to raise awareness of your existence and the trials and tribulations that you as indigenous people face in Bangladesh?

Dr. Aditya Dewan: In 2011 I sent a memorandum to the Bangladesh prime minister on the constitutional amendment work that was going on. It was the 16th amendment to the constitution of

Bangladesh. We requested or appealed that indigenous people, their identity as indigenous people, should be enshrined in Bangladesh's constitution. The Bangladesh government completely denied that appeal. Hasina's government could do that under the constitution, because they have more than two-thirds of the majority. They can do whatever they like right now because of the majority they have in the government.

I'll give you just one example. At the airport there were lots of billboards with pictures of smiling indigenous women. When the question later came up about the UN with regard to indigenous people, they removed the billboards. The indigenous women were erased. Subsequently there were government orders that all the foreign aid agencies and government agencies must not refer to indigenous peoples. Government officials were ordered to erase the term “indigenous” from all government documents, when previously....

So they said one thing one day and another thing the next day. They completely changed overnight because whatever army-loving group went to the prime minister and said, “If you recognize the indigenous people, we'll have to give up our land to them”, and this and that. As I said, there was the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and Bangladesh was one of the signatories. Even the ILO, the International Labour Organization, in conventions 107 and 169 recognizes Bangladesh as a signatory.

If they say that indigenous people are just there, there will be a big problem because of the money and some other things they get from UNESCO, from the United Nations, from the World Bank. This is the reason they are very much denying why there should be indigenous.... They are saying that we are indigenous.

That is my understanding.

● (1400)

The Chair: Thank you to our witnesses. I know you went through some transportation issues getting here. We're grateful that you were able to come and shed some light on this very important subject. We very much appreciate your attendance here.

If you do have any materials to leave, please leave them with the clerk before you go back home.

Thanks very much, colleagues.

We are adjourned.

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