August 1, 2007, Washington D.C., USA
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Need to protect the rights of Hindus in Bangladesh: Key Congressmen observe

Washington D.C., August 1, 2007: An exhibition of photos and panels vividly describing the atrocities on Hindus in Bangladesh caught the attention of influential Congressmen and key policymakers from the Bush administration this week.

The two day-exhibition titled "Asru" was held at the Rayburn House Office Building at the US Capitol on July 30 and July 31. The exhibit of 28 panels, which graphically chronicled the deteriorating condition of the Hindus and other religious minorities in Bangladesh over the past several decades, was put together by the Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities (HRCBM) and Foundation Against Continuing Terrorism (FACT).

"It is time that the world knew what is happening with the Hindu minorities in Bangladesh," said Amalendu Chatterjee, HRCBM Director. The population of the Hindus in this Muslim-majority country, he pointed out, has dropped from as high as 37 percent in 1940s to a mere 11 percent now. "It is all because of the atrocities perpetrated on the Hindus by the ruling class all these years," he said.

In organizing an exhibition on the plight of Hindus and other minorities in Bangladesh for the first time in the history of the Capitol, the efforts of HRCBM and FACT did cut ice among the Congressmen and key policymakers who took time out of their busy schedule to take a look at what was on display. "All the representatives and their staffers reiterated the need to protect the rights of minorities and to deal with Islamic groups in a resolute manner," said Utsav Chakrabarti, the designer of the exhibit and member of FACT.

The exhibition received bipartisan support from Congressional leaders and was attended by concerned citizens, political analysts and human rights representatives.

Moved by the graphic description of the condition of the Hindus and other religious minorities in Bangladesh, powerful Congressman Ed Royce (R-CA) said in the visitor's book kept at the exhibition: "The international community must take action against these genocidal acts now before this culture is extinguished and the minorities forcibly killed, converted, or exiled in the face of an underground jihad."
Royce who spent more than an hour at the exhibition hall visiting each and every panel expressed optimism that due to this effort by HRCBM and FACT, members of Congress will be educated "as to the extreme challenge and persecution faced by Hindus, Buddhists and Christians due to the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh."

Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ), who sponsored the event at the Capitol said after visiting the exhibition: 'I was proud to be the Congressional sponsor of this important exhibit on human rights in Bangladesh. I believe it helped to bring much-needed attention to the plight of minorities in Bangladesh who have suffered from increasing attacks over the past few years."

Influential Joseph Crowley (D-NY), founder and co-chair of the Congressional Caucus for Bangladesh, and member of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, said the exhibition "serves as an important reminder to the international community that we must remain vigilant in preventing violence, suffering and loss around the world." He expressed his willingness to "continue working with my colleagues in Congress to help all of the people of Bangladesh to ensure their religious and ethnic backgrounds are respected".

The event also had presentations by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), Ranking Member on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Mark Kirk (R-IL), co-chair of the Congressional Caucus for Bangladesh, Rep. Steve Chabot (R-OH), and Rep. Bob Etheridge (D-NC),

Other speakers at a panel discussion organized during the exhibition period included Richard Benkin, author, human rights activist, and defender of Bangladeshi journalist Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury; Shahriar Kabir, reputed journalist and human rights activist; Samaresh Baidya, senior reporter of Daily Bhorer Kagoj, a news daily in Bangladesh; and Toni Van Pelt, Government Affairs Director, Center for Inquiry Office of Public Policy. Also present at the event were Steve Snow, Senior Policy Analyst at United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), and T. Kumar, Advocacy Director, Asia & Pacific, Amnesty International USA.

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Toni Van Pelt expressed dismay at the apathy of the human rights groups towards Hindu rape and molestation victims, while urging the media to take the cause of Hindus in Bangladesh by reporting such incidents.

Shahriar Kabir urged for global pressure on governments in Bangladesh to take stringent action against Jamaat-e-Islam for its role in continuing atrocities against minorities. He also reiterated the need to repeal the vested interest property act which allows the
government of Bangladesh to confiscate properties of non-resident Hindus and others it deems as an enemy of the state. Samaresh Baidya narrated his first-hand experience facing the wrath of fundamentalist Islamists. He underlined the need for the journalist community to expose the reality of religious intolerance and persecution.

Dwijen Bhattachariya, from the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, and Professor at Columbia University, felt that Bangladesh was quickly turning into a Taliban-like state with potential for becoming a breeding ground for the next generation of jihadi terrorists.

Rosalind Costa, a social worker from Bangladesh narrated her experience rescuing women in rural areas. She described the case of two minor rape victims Rita Rani Das and Purnima Shil who were gang-raped by Jihadi and forcibly converted to Islam.

"Our goal was to create awareness and activism in order to alleviate the plight of Hindus and other religious minorities in that region. And we have achieved it," said Chatterjee, adding that encouraged by the response, the organizers have now decided to take this exhibition to other parts of the country as well, with Houston being its next destination later this month.

**Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities:** HRCBM is a non-profit organization holding consultative status with the United Nations. It is dedicated to protecting the human rights of religious minorities in Bangladesh.

**Foundation Against Continuing Terrorism:** FACT is non-profit organization dedicated to raising awareness of the effects of terrorism in South Asia through exhibitions and conferences.

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Rep. Ed Royce (R-CA), in discussion with Dr Amalendu Chatterjee (right) and Mr. Kanchan Banerjee (back)

Shahriar Kabir (left), reputed journalist and human rights activist speaking to visiting staffers.