



House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
March 24, 2016

Hindu American Foundation
Testimony on Fiscal Year 2017
Written Statement for the Record

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I. Introduction

On behalf of the Hindu American Foundation (HAF), a non-profit advocacy and human rights organization that has been monitoring and documenting religious freedom and human rights conditions globally for 13 years, we respectfully submit this Written Statement for the Record on appropriations for Fiscal Year (FY) 2017. In particular, we would like to address the following programs in the Congressional Budget Justification FY 2017 for the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (International Security Assistance): **(1)** IMET: South and Central Asia (\$12.9 Million); **(2)** FMF: South and Central Asia (\$2.8 Million); **(3)** Bangladesh: Development Assistance (\$86.16 Million); **(4)** Nepal: Development Assistance (\$64 Million).

Moreover, we seek to provide additional recommendations on FY 2017 International Affairs Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) programs: **(1)** ESF - OCO: South and Central Asia (\$1,505.8 Million); **(2)** INCLE- OCO:Afghanistan (\$185 million); **(3)** INCLE- OCO: Pakistan (\$40 million); and **(4)** FMF - OCO: Pakistan (\$265 million)

II. Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs

IMET: South and Central Asia (\$12.9 Million)

International Military Education Training (IMET) programs are of critical importance to furthering respect for human rights in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Security and defense forces, which often take on significant domestic policing roles in these two countries, continue to struggle to uphold the rule of law and protect the human rights of their citizens. This is due in part to a lack of adequate training on international human rights norms, insufficient resources, and an absence of effective cultural and religious competency programs. Moreover, a dearth of ethnic, gender, and religious diversity within the ranks of the defense forces in Pakistan and Bangladesh, particularly in officer track positions, limit their ability to deal effectively with minority populations.

Consequently, we recommend that IMET funds directed towards Pakistan and Bangladesh incorporate a greater emphasis on cultural and religious competency training. Similarly, the disbursement of IMET funds should require the respective military establishments of these two countries to institute recruitment and advancement quotas from traditionally underrepresented communities.

FMF: South and Central Asia (\$2.8 million)

Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to professionalize security forces in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh should include requirements for increased cultural sensitivity and competency training. This will enable security forces to respond more efficiently to disasters areas or border regions that have high concentrations of ethnic and/or religious minority populations. For instance, in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, it is critical that the security forces, comprised predominantly of Sinhala Buddhists, are trained adequately on how to work with and gain the trust of the Tamil community (Hindus, Christians, and Muslims), in order to calibrate disaster responses effectively. Additionally, in Bangladesh, security forces must be equipped to protect the lives, properties, and places of worship of ethnic and religious minorities in the event of a natural disaster, large-scale religious riots, or in a sensitive border area.

Bangladesh: Development Assistance (\$86.16 Million)

Bangladesh has witnessed a dramatic escalation in anti-minority violence and a growing climate of religious intolerance, with systemic attacks on Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Ahmadis, and Atheists. These minorities have also been subjected routine discrimination and have been deprived of equal economic and other opportunities. Minorities are further underrepresented in government and civil positions, as well as in all branches of the security and defense forces. Development assistance to Bangladesh should thus address the conditions of minorities in order to create a more stable and secure nation.

Funds, for instance should support the induction of more religious minority community members in government programs as well as administrative and military services, particularly at the officer level. The National Human Rights Commission should be strengthened through development assistance to support constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and equal protection and to ensure the protection of minorities. Additional funds should also create religious and cultural competency training programs for all levels and branches of government. Implementation of these projects should be monitored closely by USAID and U.S. Embassy officials in Bangladesh.

Nepal: Development Assistance (\$64 million)

USAID funding and programs are essential to Nepal, particularly after the devastating earthquake in April 2015 rendering almost 9,000 people dead and 3.5 million people homeless, and causing \$10 billion in damage. Particularly damaged were cultural and historic landmarks throughout the earthquake zone causing distress to the tourism industry of Nepal, which comprises a majority of its revenue stream.

Additional funding should be allocated within this sum, or added to its total, for rehabilitation of these damaged cultural sites to ensure Nepal's tourism industry remains central to its economic recovery.

In September 2015, Nepal's drafting of a new constitution resulted in several ethnic communities feeling marginalized and politically/economically disenfranchised, particularly the Madhesis near the Nepal-India border. Any development and assistance funding for Nepal should ensure that all communities are enfranchised by the new constitutional reforms by mandated mechanisms for monitoring disbursements of aid throughout the country and amongst various communities.

Additionally, Hindus and Buddhists of Nepal - the largest religious communities in the country, have noted the influx of Christian missionaries, many affiliated with existing USAID certified partners, exploiting the population's vulnerability during this time of distress. All USAID partners should be monitored to ensure they operate closely within already mandated guidelines to not proselytize, specifically under times of distress after natural disasters.

III. International Affairs Overseas Contingency Operations

ESF - OCO: South and Central Asia (\$1,505.8 Million)

Afghanistan (\$1,027 million): Afghanistan's ongoing democratic transition and economic development still requires significant support. The country's religious minorities, Hindus and Sikhs in particular, lack sufficient political representation and are economically marginalized. Economic discrimination and disparate government treatment have left these communities with few opportunities. They similarly lack educational opportunities and face discrimination in the public school system, forcing them to attend Sikh schools with limited resources.

Consequently, the disbursement of Economic Support Funds (ESF) should support quotas for religious minorities in civil service positions and government supported programs. Moreover, ESF funds should create educational opportunities for minorities by funding additional schools for Hindus/Sikhs. Additional schools should be created by the government to allow them to obtain an education free of religious prejudice and harassment.

Pakistan (\$400 million): Religious minorities face systemic economic, political, and educational discrimination in Pakistan. Pakistan's public school system and its madrassas continue to use textbooks that indoctrinate students with prejudicial and intolerant views of religious minorities. Teachers also hold regressive views towards minorities and help fuel an intolerant educational atmosphere. ESF funds for Pakistan's education sector should go beyond reading skills and teacher capacity and should also focus on working with the Federal Education Ministry and provincial textbook boards implementing standardized curriculum reforms and on working with publishers to print new textbooks that (1) promote religious pluralism and mutual respect, (2) remove inflammatory and negative content about minorities,

and (3) segregate Islamic instruction from secular subjects. Furthermore, teachers should undergo cultural competency training to help change their views towards religious minorities.

INCLE- OCO

Afghanistan (\$185 million): Strengthening Afghanistan’s capacity to govern in a fair, transparent, secure, and effective manner through the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) program should include provisions to address the needs of religious minorities. Afghan security forces and law enforcement have been unable or unwilling to protect Hindu and Sikh minorities from harassment, violence, and forced conversions. As a result, their ability to openly practice their faith has been severely limited. Law enforcement has failed to intervene and stop attacks on Hindu and Sikh cremation ceremonies.

Moreover, due to societal harassment and discrimination, the vast majority of Hindu and Sikh children, particularly girls, do not attend local public schools, and often put their children in Sikh schools, which receive limited government funding. Hindus do not have their own schools.

A portion of INCLE funds should therefore be accorded to bolstering security for Hindus and Sikhs and their temples allowing them to worship freely and without fear of harassment, forced conversions, societal discrimination, or interference in their religious ceremonies.

Pakistan (\$40 million): INCLE funds directed towards strengthening law enforcement and institutions in Pakistan should apportion funds that focus on provincial and local entities. In particular, INCLE funds should be used towards creating standard police and judicial procedures as well as local law enforcement training to deal with kidnappings, forced conversions, and involuntary marriages of Hindu and Christian women and girls. Although there are no definitive statistics on the number of incidents, many NGOs and human rights groups, including Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD) and the Movement for Solidarity and Peace, have estimated that more than 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls are kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam every year.

Furthermore, requirements should be placed on INCLE funds to Pakistan that support recruitment of religious and ethnic minorities in the security forces. For instance, INCLE funds should help create special task forces to protect minority places of worship, such as the plan to hire 2,000 Hindu and Christian policemen to guard religious sites in Sindh, in the aftermath of a series of attacks on churches.

Finally, INCLE funds should ensure strengthening the enforcement capacity of police personnel in rural areas of Sindh and Punjab, where current laws prohibiting bonded labor remain unenforced. Moreover, increased training should be provided to help police combat this practice that plagues millions of poor, primarily minority, Pakistanis.

FMF - OCO: Pakistan (\$265 million)

Pakistan has demonstrated a past propensity to utilize Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program funds and equipment to advance its regional ambitions, particularly in India and Afghanistan, rather than for their intended purpose of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations. Consequently, FMF funds should be reduced in amount and adhere to strict accounting procedures that allow for a mechanism to monitor how the money is spent or how the equipment is used.

IV. Conclusion

As described and justified above, we seek the following implementations for the State Department's FY 2017 budget:

- IMET funds should ensure members of minority communities in Pakistan and Bangladesh are afforded placement in officer ranks of their respective militaries.
- FMF to professionalize security forces in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh should include requirements for increased cultural sensitivity and competency training when engaging minority communities.
- Development assistance for Bangladesh:
 - Should support the induction of more religious minority community members in government programs, administrative, and military services, particularly at the officer level;
 - The National Human Rights Commission should be strengthened through development assistance to support constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and equal protection, and to ensure the protection of minorities;
 - Additional funds should also create religious and cultural competency training programs for all levels and branches of government.
- Development assistance for Nepal:
 - Should support rehabilitation of damaged cultural and historic landmarks to ensure tourism remains essential to Nepal's economic recovery;
 - Should ensure that all communities are enfranchised by the new constitutional reforms;
 - USAID partners must be monitored to ensure they are not proselytizing, which is against already mandated guidelines.
- In Afghanistan, INCLE funds should be disbursed to enhance and bolster security for Hindus and Sikhs.
- In Pakistan, INCLE funds:
 - Should apportion resources that focus on provincial and local law enforcement along with judicial institutions;
 - Should mandate recruitment of religious and ethnic minorities in the security forces;
 - Should ensure strengthening the enforcement capacity of police personnel in rural areas of Sindh and Punjab, where current laws prohibiting bonded labor remain unenforced.
- FMF funds in Pakistan should be reduced in amount and adhere to strict accounting procedures that allow for a mechanism to monitor how the money is spent or how the equipment is used. This will be to ensure the intended counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations are carried out.