



Michelle Rowland MP

Federal Member for Greenway

OPINION PIECE

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BANGLADESH

In 1971, Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) gained its independence from Pakistan, after having been denied the opportunity for self-rule since the Indian subcontinent was partitioned in 1947. However, attaining independence was not without terrible sacrifice. In March 1971, the Pakistani military joined forces with extremist militias in a brutal suppression of the Bangladeshi people, which included the rape, torture and murder of ordinary citizens. As appalling atrocities continued to be committed, millions of Bangladeshis fled. Ten million became refugees and 40 million were internally displaced.

However, after nine months of brutality, Bangladesh eventually achieved its independence from foreign military occupation in December 1971, and became the sovereign People's Republic of Bangladesh. The new republic was to be based on principles of nationalism, democracy, secularism, socialism, tolerance and equality.

An undertaking was given by the new government to punish those who had committed atrocities and war crimes. However, it was not until four decades later, in 2010 that a tribunal was established to investigate and try those involved in the 1971 war crimes.

The present government and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina established two International Crime Tribunals (ICTBD). The ICTBD is a domestic tribunal under domestic legislation, but was set up with an explicit aim to accommodate and adhere to standards of international criminal law.

The establishment of the tribunal sought to correct the long-term impunity granted to the perpetrators of heinous war crimes against the Bangladeshi people, and to ensure those responsible were held duly accountable. I believe that the Bangladeshi government and international community must continue to strive for justice for the victims of past human rights violations through stringent, fair and transparent criminal prosecutions.

It is my hope that authorities in Bangladesh will strive to uphold fair trial processes, to restore the trust of the Bangladeshi people in the rule of law, but also to achieve long-due justice for victims of past human rights violations.

The majority of those to be tried by the ICTBD are members of the Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist group with associated militia groups that joined forces with the Pakistan military in the 1971 independence clash. They are believed to have committed many of the atrocities that were committed against the Bangladeshi people.

The ICTBD handed down its first verdict in January of this year, sentencing former Jamaat member, Abul Kalam Azad to death. On February 5th, a current Jamaat leader was sentenced to life in prison. On February 28, another Jamaat leader, Vice-president Delawar Hossain Sayedee was handed the death sentence by the tribunal, found guilty on counts of genocide, rape and religious persecution.

Many thousands of Bangladeshis have been demonstrating in Dhaka, demanding justice for crimes committed and urging for the ICTBD to continue to hand down strict sentences against those found guilty. At the same time, Jamaat members have retaliated violently to news of death sentences against their members. This has led to violent clashes in Dhaka and across the country, between demonstrators, government and security forces and Jamaat activists. Jamaat members have been involved in many reported attacks against and clashes with police, including arson, vandalism and targeted killings. It is reported that more than 100 people have been killed.

I call for and hope for an immediate stop to the violence in Bangladesh and a return to peaceful demonstrations and the just rule of law. Of particular concern to me are unprovoked attacks against members of the minority Hindu community, their homes and places of worship, as well as journalists and online writers.

As someone who represents a large Bangladeshi community in Australia's Federal Parliament I feel it is my responsibility to speak up for their interests and condemn the violence that is occurring in their homeland.

The Bangladeshi community in Australia is an extremely active one, with many Bangladeshi-Australians greatly contributing to a variety of fields, including academia, business, health, engineering and information technologies.

The work of notable Bangladeshis, such as Canberra University Professor, Dr Mohammad Ali Quazi and of course the successful business executive and Greenway resident, Mr Nur Rahman and his wife the only Bangladeshi Veterinary Surgeon in Australia Dr Lovely Rahman, do not go unnoticed. They along with all Bangladeshi-Australians are greatly appreciated in the community. Their contribution to Australian society is crucial and ensures that Australia continues to be a productive, multicultural and diverse nation and they are rightly concerned about violence that is occurring in their homeland.

Whilst Bangladesh has achieved much in its 40 years of independence, the Bangladeshi government and leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami must act to put a stop to

violent clashes to ensure that the country can continue to grow, and that past wrongs can be dealt with to ensure justice and future peace for their country.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michelle Rowland". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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