

*TROUBLING YEAR; Terror on the rise in Bangladesh; Religious-extremist attacks
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BODY:

SYLHET, Bangladesh - One recent afternoon Farjana Siddika opened her office mail and found she was marked for death.

"We are going to kill all the atheists, and you are on the list," the typed letter read. "You cannot live with a Hindu on the holy soil of Sylhet. You must make amends or face the consequences."

"At first I thought it was a hoax," said the 34-year-old literature professor, whose marriage to a Hindu is a rarity in this country of 140 million Muslims, and whose liberal views are equally rare at the technical college where she teaches. "But when my family heard about it they went into a panic."

No wonder. Sylhet, a northern Bangladeshi city known better for tea gardens than religious extremism, has been terrorized by seven grenade blasts and dozens of death threats this year, leaving five people dead and more than 100 injured. "This bomb culture is completely new to Sylhet," said Mayor Badaruddin Kamran, the target of an August blast that killed a friend.

Pattern of terror

The terror isn't limited to academics and politicians. Three movie theaters have been bombed and Sylhet's holiest shrine, the tomb of a seventh-century Sufi saint, has been hit twice by grenade attacks. Islamic radicals believe

praying at shrines - a common practice in most of the Muslim world - amounts to idolatry. No one has been charged in either attack.

The attacks mirror a pattern of unchecked violence across Bangladesh, sparking concerns that religious radicals - nurtured by al-Qaida-linked Islamic charities and protected by the government - are undermining long-held traditions of tolerance and moderate Islam.

"If there is a country in the world today in danger of completely breaking down, it's Bangladesh," said Gowher Rizvi, a Bangladeshi who heads the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University.

The violence made world news Aug. 21 when Sheikh Hasina, a former prime minister, was nearly slain in a grenade attack that killed 20 people in Dhaka, the capital. In May, the British ambassador was hurt and three Bangladeshis were killed in a blast at the Shah Jalal shrine.

Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, the parliamentary affairs adviser to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, discounted talk of rising Islamic extremism. "I don't think I'd take it too seriously," said Chowdhury, who is a member of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh's leading Islamist party.

Others say Zia's Bangladesh National Party is allowing militants to tip the balance against Hasina's party, the rival Awami League. "By unleashing fundamentalist forces in the country, they will be able to contain the Awami League," Rizvi said.

Zia's ruling coalition includes two Islamist parties and her government includes men accused of war crimes during the 1971 war for independence from Pakistan. It's estimated that Pakistani soldiers and local allies killed as many as 1 million people during the fight to create an independent Bangladesh from what was then Pakistan's eastern wing.

Rivalry continues

Bangladeshi politics is captive to the rivalry of Hasina and Zia. Hasina's father, Sheik Mujibur Rahman, led Bangladesh from its birth until 1975, when he was killed by army officers. Zia's late husband, Gen. Ziaur Rahman, then ruled until he, too, was slain in 1981.

This blood feud divides every institution, including the army, the civil service and the media, leaving education and public health to thousands of aid groups and charities. Corruption is pervasive.

Despite these handicaps, Bangladesh has made great strides, outpacing regional giant India in areas including infant mortality, sanitation, family planning and health spending. After 15 years of army rule, there have been three successful national elections.

Despite her Islamist partners, Zia is pushing to reserve a third of the seats in parliament for women and wants to reform the country's divorce laws.

Zia crushed Hasina in the 2001 elections by promising law and order. But violence has only grown. On Oct. 29, a mob of 1,000 people razed a mosque of the embattled Ahmadiyya Muslim sect during Ramadan prayers. Islamic radicals consider the Ahmadiyya heretics.

Some analysts fear the conditions that allow a mob to tear down a dissident mosque could draw foreign militants.

Platform for terrorism

Few believe Bangladesh is the next Afghanistan. But the U.S. State Department's counter-terrorism chief, J. Cofer Black, told reporters before visiting Dhaka in September that he was concerned about "the potential utilization of Bangladesh as a platform for international terrorism."

It was unclear what prompted Black's comment, but local and foreign media describe the lawless southeast as a possible haven for militants. Riduan Isamuddin, known as Hambali, the **alleged ringleader of the 2002 Bali bombings in Indonesia, was heading to Bangladesh when he was captured in Thailand last year**, regional officials said.

In a recent expose of domestic militants, the newspaper Prothom Alo detailed a network of training camps run by the terror group Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami. The camps are connected to local mosques and madrassas - Islamic boarding schools - that are in turn funded by charities with alleged ties to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network.

Bangladesh has 6,900 government-regulated secondary-level madrassas that teach modern subjects alongside the Quran, a rarity among Muslim countries. But thousands of others are funded by unregulated private donors, often charities pushing a more intolerant strain of Islam than is native to Bangladesh.

Chowdhury downplayed such funding. "Look, Bangladesh is a country where most of the people live on less than 2,000 calories a day. If someone offers money, we'll take it."

GRAPHIC: Photo by Dan Morrison- Farjana Siddika has recently received a death threat.

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