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PRESS RELEASE

Bangladesh struggles between secular and radical Islamist forces, says Congressman Matt Salmon

Congressman Matt Salmon, the Chairman of the sub-committee on Asia and the Pacific of the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, has said 'what really is at stake in Bangladesh is a struggle for ideological foundation of the nation between those that would emphasize secular ideas and Bengali ethnic identity, and those that seek a firm Islamist ideology.'

He said the Bangladesh is a strong and dependable ally of the US in the fight against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.

In his opening remarks at the congressional hearing on Bangladesh titled "Bangladesh Fractures: Political and Religious Extremism" on April 30 at the Capitol Hill, Chairman Salmon said 'Bangladesh has been a vital security partner in the combat against extremist terrorist groups as it currently combats eight or more major Islamic groups within their borders—many with ties to international terrorists networks,' Congressman Salmon said

He said Bangladesh is a unique country with an inspirational story and a moderate voice in the Islamic world. "Bangladesh is a key partner in the struggle against Islamist extremism, and we hope to continue this collectively with Bangladesh.'

Congressman Salmon praised the earnest advances of Bangladesh with consistent GDP growth of 6.2 percent. He said Bangladesh's fractious politics is dominated by competing political factions and polarization between Awami League and BNP that has reached new levels, and politically motivated attacks have begun to target everyday people, including commuters and students.' We have seen assaults on journalists and horrific fire bomb attacks on buses.

In Bangladesh, there is a great potential. We have the opportunity to support a society that embraces non-violent political competition, and one that shirks religious extremism.

He said Bangladesh's geographic position at the cross roads of India, China and the rest of South Asia is growing strategic importance. Bangladesh has long been a trading partner with the United States, "we enjoy amiable trade relations through our ongoing bilateral Trade Investment Framework Agreement (TICFA). We also have a strong interest in supporting fellow democracy, particularly in the Muslim world.

In his concluding remarks, Chairman Salmon said the hearing is not to criticize Bangladesh rather to find ways to support Bangladesh as a robust partner of the US in the crossroad of South Asia which needs to be widen to reap the real potential of the country.

Congressman Steve Chabot said Bangladesh is a crucial partner in South Asia in the fields of security, humanitarian, peacekeeping and maritime issues. During question-answer session Congressman Chabot asked whether there is any possibility to bring the two major parties to

dialogue. In reply Dr. Ali Riaz, Chair of the Department of Politics and Government, Illinois State University, said the people of Bangladesh will have to find solution to the problem.

Referring to the killing of secular bloggers Avijit Roy and Washiqur Rahman, Congressman Chabot wanted to know about the ground realities in Bangladesh, Lisa Curtis, Senior Research Fellow, the Heritage Foundation, mentioned the violent acts being spearheaded by Islamist extremists and said situation in Bangladesh is disturbing. The opposition resorted to petrol bomb attacks on passenger buses killing more than hundred people, secular blogger Avijit was killed near a book fair.

Congressman Brad Sherman, the ranking member of the sub-committee, asked whether text books for the primary education are distributed free of cost in Bangladesh, Dr. Ali Riaz said the books are provided free of cost just at the beginning of academic session every year and free education and stipends are also being given to female students.

Citing huge economic loss incurred during the BNP-Jamaat led violent agitation from January to March this year, Congressman Salmon said the business community should encourage political parties to work out a peaceful resolution to the problem.

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