**Cristo Rey Jesuit High School**

Chicago, Illinois

Security and Stability in South Asia

Briefing Paper

*Bangladesh*

**A. Introduction**

Bangladesh is stepping into 2010 - leaving behind an eventful 2009 that saw the return of democracy and the assumption of power resulting in a democratically elected government after a two year long regime of the military-backed caretaker government. The coming year is seen as a transition period for both politics and the socio-economic scenario of the country as a string of issues are scheduled to dominate the national agenda this year, including concerns about climate change and its effect on the country, looming shortages in the rice supply, and continuing concerns about the global recession. On the political front, people are yet to find any major shift from the traditional political culture dominated by corruption, mistrust and suspicion. All of this is set against the perennial problem of over-population and the highest population density of any country on the planet. This situation offers special challenges to a country moving from an agriculturally based economy to one that is more urban and service oriented.

**B. Key Points**

The most pressing issues facing Bangladesh are:

• maintaining the political stability and curbing corruption of the newly installed national government

• issues relating to climate change and its impact of the fragile physical geography of Bangladesh

• the continuing necessity to improve and expand the country’s infrastructure – especially maintaining the present electrical power supply and increasing it to meet ever-growing needs

• providing an adequate food supply (especially rice) to meet the food needs of the population

• threat of an H1N1 pandemic in a densely populated country with limited health care facilities

•growing concerns over Islamist extremist groups that support terrorist activities

• challenges to the nation’s economy (now increasingly service- oriented) in the current recessionary global economy

**C. Background on Bangladesh**

Bangladesh, located in south-central Asia, is the most densely populated nation in the world. Known as Bengal prior to the British-led partition of India in 1947, Bangladesh fell under control of Pakistan. It was henceforth called East Pakistan until 1971, when it achieved independence, thanks largely to help from India. Bangladesh's landscape is dominated by the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers with their vast deltas, one of the few two-river deltas in the world. Dhaka, the capital, is located in the heart of this region. Located where it is means that Bangladesh experiences massive floods during the monsoon season because most of the country is at or near sea level.

The population is characterized by extremes. The people, mostly peasant farmers, are among the world’s poorest and mostly rural, although the situation is gradually beginning to change as the economy becomes more service oriented. Even so, millions of Bangladeshis are victims of floods resulting from the power of cyclones and monsoons. These conditions bring ongoing medical problems and food shortages. In such an environment, people are constantly competing for space.

Fertile flood plain soil is the chief resource of this mostly flat river-crossed country. That makes farming the main activity as it has been for centuries. Rice and jute are among the major crops although the demand for jute on the world market is dropping due to the development of more efficient products used for making rope. Farm output fluctuates greatly due to the floods and droughts that afflict this country located as it is in the semi-tropical climate zones. The onslaught of global warming has meant a rise in sea levels creating another natural hazard with which Bangladesh must deal.

In recent years, millions of people have moved to the cities in search of jobs, education, and increased economic opportunity. Foreign investment has helped this situation significantly. Now Bangladesh is exporting textiles and clothing as well as electronic equipment. It has an active foreign trade and shows great promise as an economically developing country.

Islam, the major religion, has influenced every aspect of life with increasing evidence of growing numbers of Islamic extremists in the country. This is a result of a deep-seated resentment of western influences that are seen as culturally corrupting. Terrorism is on the rise despite efforts from a number of sources to assure a stable political and economic environment. Concerns about the country’s stability are a growing concern among its neighbors in the region.

**D. Issues**

**• Committee on Governance**

Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy where the political power is held by an elected parliament that represents all the people. It holds direct elections where all citizens over the legal age of 18 can vote every five years. Currently it has 345 members, with only 45 seats reserved for women. The head of the government is the prime minister and the cabinet runs the daily business of the country. An elected president functions as the head of state.

Bangladesh consists of two major political parties:

* Bangladesh Awami League: commonly known as the Awami League, it is the mainstream [center-left](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Center-left), [secular](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular) political party in [Bangladesh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangladesh). It is also at this time the governing party after winning the [2008 Parliamentary elections](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008_Parliamentary_elections_in_Bangladesh).
* Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP): the mainstream [center-right](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Center-right) political party. It is now the largest opposition party in the Parliament of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh’s constitution was drafted in 1972. This constitution declares Bangladesh as a Sovereign Country; in addition, it also lays down the structure, procedures and duties of the government. The constitution was prepared on the day the Bangladeshis defeated the Pakistan army. This constitution was founded on the hope of freedom and national liberation. This is why Bangladesh was given the name of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh.

The Islamic religion present in Bangladesh is strongly ingrained in the country’s culture. Ninety percent of the population is Muslim. About ninety seven percent are *Sunni* and three percent are *Shi’a.*

* Sunni: this group is referred to as people of the tradition (“of Muhammad and the community"). It is a dominant force across the Islamic world. The word “Sunni” comes from the Arab word *followers* referring to the allegiance to the Prophet.
* Shi’a: this is the second largest denomination of [Islam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam). The followers of Shi’a Islam are also known as Shiites. Shi’a Islam holds that Muhammad's family and certain individuals among his descendants, who are known as [Imams](x-dictionary:r:'Shi%27a_Imams?lang=en'), have special spiritual and political rule over the community.

The split between these two groups of Islam is four thousand four hundred years old. This separation happened because of the fight of who would lead the faithful after the Prophet Muhammad’s death in 632. One side of the people believed that descendents of Muhammad should take the mantle of the caliph (the leader of the world’s faithful) - also known as the Shi’ites. The Sunnis thought that any worthy man could lead the faithful, regardless of lineage, and favored a man who married into Muhammad’s family. The Shiites were the eventual losers in a violent struggle for mastery that lasted decades. As a result, this group now has minority status in global Islam.

It is an assumption among the citizens in Bangladesh that political corruption is viewed as “a way of life”. People believe that among the most corrupt are the police and are convinced all government officials can be bought for a price. Corruption is not only political activity based on a desire to gain political power, it has consequences in the economic activity of the country as well. Over the years, corruption has become so ingrained that it is now a part of the social process which means it is present everywhere in Bangladesh. However, Bangladesh has shown progress in coming to terms with the need to curb corrupt practices in every aspect of the life of the country. Even though Bangladesh is near the top of the Corruption Perception Index (CPI), in recent years it has dropped from 147th to 139th out of 180 countries. Bangladeshis recognize the importance of strengthening every political and economic institution including Parliament. A recently formed Anti-Corruption Commission is working to create a more sustainable society. The government insists that the commission is still new but will play a strong role in curbing corruption once the body develops with time.

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**• Committee on Economic Challenges**

Bangladesh is the seventh heaviest densely populated countries in the world. It is also located almost at sea level because it is the site of the Ganges Delta as well as Padma, and the Meghna rivers that flow into the Bay of Bengal. These rivers have made Bangladesh a highly productive agricultural country because of the sediment regularly deposited in their flood plains. Climate in general plays a major role in Bangladesh and affects every aspect on its culture and economy. The country is monsoon dependent because without the summer rains, agriculture would collapse. In addition, the uncertainty of its weather causes tropical cyclones, tornadoes, soil degradation, and severe flooding. That makes food shortages and famine an ever-present reality.

For centuries, Bangladesh was one of the wealthiest parts of the world because of its agricultural productivity. However, conditions changed dramatically in the 12th century when problems between Hindus and Buddhists developed but Islamic invaders swarmed into the region. Muslims ruler dominated the country the Mogul viceroys in charge until the arrival of the British in the mid-19th century.

British rule was so unpopular over the decade that people started to blame them for Bengal’s poverty, its political instability, and its inability to prosper in the region. People believed that the British were exploiting Bangladesh. Rioting and protest was commonplace

Toward the end of World War II, it was obvious that Bangladesh was going to become independent and the country established its independence in 1947. This, however, did not stop the fighting in Bengal. Hindus and Buddhists still wanted control over this territory that caused feuds within the country especially with the Moslem majority. One of the bloodiest resulted because jute was the major crop. While Muslims grew it, the Hindus controlled the major shipping port. Pakistan had to send troops to stop the riots. The following decades were tumultuous, but in 1971, it finally gained its full independence.

Since that time, Bangladesh has prospered in many ways. One of its biggest achievements was the Grameen Bank. The founder of this bank was Muhammad Yunus, a Bangladeshi economist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 for his creative invention. The word Grameen means *community* or *village*; this bank developed in response to the community needs of nearly impoverished farmer who had no access to banks and other lending institutions. The bank was created as a not-for-profit allowing them to small farmers to borrow money for small business enterprises and giving them enough time to pay it back. The people making the loans are mainly women who opened businesses as weavers, potters, bakers, chicken and egg farmers, and spice merchants. Through their success, t hey have been able to pay back their debts in a timely manner. As a result, there is a very low percent of defaulted loans.

Bangladesh is known for its agriculture (three-fifths of the population is in farming). However, an increasing percentage of the population is moving to the country’s cities to engage in service and small manufacturing activities. As a result, exports now include:

* Jute (for the manufacture of rope, cord and twine)
* Tea
* Garments
* Leather
* Fish/ Sea Food

Throughout the years jute has been replaced with rubber and plastic so the demand of jute has decreased and so has the supply. Jute was the economic engine since it covered about 80% of the economy. But new opportunities have surfaced. Now the main economic activity is making and assembling garments that are sold in retail clothing stores across the world.

Even with these successes, Bangladesh is not economically self-sufficient. It has an active import trade for items necessary to the country’s survival. Imports include:

• Chemicals

* Iron and steel
* Textiles
* Raw materials
* Petroleum products
* Machinery

Most of these imports come from the United States, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom.

The tropical-monsoon climate of Bangladesh affects the country in many ways; many argue for good and others for bad. Bangladesh has had to adapt to natural disasters over the years. That has resulted in early warning systems for cyclones, tsunamis, and violent tropical storms. The international community has been very responsive in times of catastrophe with aid, medial help, and financial support. Global warning also affects Bangladesh greatly since it is located at sea level and is most likely to flood as the world’s water levels rise. Scientists predict that if the sea level rises one meter, then half of Bangladesh would be covered by water. The consequences are unfathomable!

Education in Bangladesh is poor with only a thirty percent literacy rate. The reason why it is so low is because many of the children have to focus on taking care of the farms and thus cannot attend school regularly Also there is little money for teachers and for supplies. Also there are not enough teachers, and teachers that are well trained.

Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world in education, technology, and economy wise. But it is always looking for opportunities to grow. The future is promising as its economy moves from being based in agriculture to being moving toward service activities.

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**• Kashmir –** This controversial issue is a matter of general concern for the Cristo Rey delegation (Bangladesh) because of the controversial role of Kashmir in the South Asia region.

Here are the two positions about the territorial integrity of Kashmir that Bangladeshis must try to resolve.

**Pakistan's version of events**: The ruler of Kashmir, as a Muslim, wished to accede to Pakistan. He was placed under tremendous pressure by the Indian government to accede to India. The Muslim population, seeing this and the covert arrival of Indian troops, rose up and rebelled against Hari Singh. The government of India, alleging that the ruler had acceded to India on the basis of a fraudulent instrument of accession, invaded and occupied a large part of Kashmir, which is now divided into Azad (Liberated) Kashmir and 'Indian-held Kashmir'. India has reneged on its promise to hold a plebiscite to determine the wishes of the Kashmiri. India needs to implement UN resolutions calling for a referendum.

**India's version of events**: Pakistan implemented an economic blockade of Kashmir to force the maharaja to accede to Pakistan. When this failed Pakistan next sent armed Pathan tribesmen into Kashmir to forcibly annex it. Maharaja Hari Singh was thus obliged to seek India's assistance, and on October 26th 1947 Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession. Indian forces entered Kashmir and fighting continued until the battle stabilized. Eventually the United Nations arranged a cease-fire January 1st 1949 and the cease-fire line became known as the Line of Control. Approximately a quarter of the western portion of the state is occupied by Pakistan, with the remainder a part of India. A plebiscite has never been held as promised because Pakistan never fulfilled a prerequisite condition - the complete withdrawal of Pakistani troops from Kashmir. Subsequently, free and fair elections have been held in Kashmir. Lastly, the future of the disputed territory is to be worked out by bilateral negotiations between India and Pakistan as called for in the Simla agreement.

**• Cite Five Issues your Country or Organization would like addressed at the conference in order of importance** (bullet format)

• CLIMATE CHANGE

• THE FUTURE OF KASHMIR

• DEALING WITH THE THREAT OF TERROISM IN SOUTH ASIA

• THE SECURITY OF THE NUCLEAR WEAPONS DEVELOPED BY INDIA AND PAKISTAN

• POLITICAL STABILITY AMONG THE NATIONS IN THE SOUTH ASIA REGION AND THEIRRELATIONSHIP WITH CHINA