The Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), in collaboration with the German and French Embassies in Dhaka, organized an International Conference on 'Religious Militancy and Security in South Asia' during 10-13 October 2004 at the BIISS Auditorium, Dhaka.

H.E. Barrister Moudud Ahmed, MP, Hon'ble Minister for Law, Justice & Parliamentary Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, inaugurated the Conference. H.E. Mr. Dietrich Andreas, the then Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany, and H.E. Mr. Jacques-Andre Costilhes, Ambassador of the Republic of France, were present as Special Guests. Major General Muhammad Abdul Matin, Director General of BIISS, delivered the address of welcome. The Inaugural Session was chaired by Ambassador Mufleh R. Osmany, Chairman, Board of Governors of BIISS.

The International Conference was split into seven working sessions. As many as fifteen papers were presented in six working sessions. Experts and scholars from
Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Germany and France participated in the conference. The last day of the Conference, i.e., the seventh working session was devoted exclusively to young scholars of the country with the objective to promote their views on the subject.

**Inaugural Session**

While inaugurating the Conference as Chief Guest, H. E. Barrister Moudud Ahmed, MP, Hon’ble Minister for Law, Justice & Parliamentary Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, stated that religious militancy needs to be defined correctly; otherwise it would create confusion and ambiguity. As he mentioned, religious militancy means religious people who are fanatics and take religion as a weapon to influence society. The minister said that no religion advocates taking up of arms against innocent people. Islam teaches to be tolerant and respectful to other religions and the Muslims around the world have practiced that teaching for centuries. He further said that compared to other South Asian nations, Bangladesh is the most peaceful nation as far as religious harmony is concerned. He also cautioned that if the ‘war in Iraq’ is perceived as a war on Islam, it would be dangerous.

In his speech as a Special Guest, H. E. Mr. Dietrich Andreas, the then Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany, said that Bangladesh has a long tradition of religious tolerance and peaceful living, but the recent emergence of religious militancy in the country posed a great threat to that tradition. He further remarked that a series of bomb attacks reflect a threat to the country’s internal security with regional and extra-regional security implications. He pointed out that the governments of the region must be aware of religious militancy and opt for good governance to combat it.
H. E. Mr. Jacques-Andre Costilhes, Ambassador of the Republic of France, said that it is important to know the analyses made by the experts from within and beyond the region. France, as a multicultural society with Islam being the second religion by the number of worshippers, urges the promotion of dialogue between cultures, including dialogue between religions. Its diplomacy will always take into consideration this fundamental belief.

Earlier in his address of welcome, Major General Muhammad Abdul Matin, Director General of BIJSS, stated the rationale and objectives of the said Conference. General Matin mentioned that security is to be understood in a comprehensive sense as also across several levels like internal, regional and international. He urged the scholars and participants to find answers to some pertinent questions regarding the causes and the ways out of the problem of religious militancy.

In his address of Chair, Ambassador Mufleh R. Osmany, Chairman, Board of Governors of BIJSS, stated various causes of religious militancy at the global level. He called upon the scholars to help in evolving a clearer understanding of the recent resurgence of religious militancy in South Asia. Ambassador Osmany said that security will remain an elusive goal unless the real cause of the so-called religious militancy is addressed. Branding religious militancy as a political problem, he said that any solution to this malady must be basically sought in the domain of politics. He stressed the need for confidence building measures to build a better South Asia.

**Working Session I:**

In the first working session titled **Frameworking Religious Militancy**, two papers were presented by Mr. Ibrahim Waheed and Professor M. Shamsher Ali respectively. Justice Latifur Rahman, Former Chief Advisor
of the Caretaker Government of Bangladesh chaired the session. A lively discussion followed the presentation of the papers. Following are the highlights of questions, comments and observations that went on across the floor:

- Some participants were averse to the use of the phrase 'religious militancy' and felt that 'militancy in the name of religion' might have been more appropriate.
- The floor suggested that the use of the term 'fundamentalism' is misleading and inappropriate. Terms like *jihad*, *militancy*, *terrorism* and *fundamentalism* are used indiscriminately and without a clear understanding of these concepts.
- There was also opinion from the floor that religious militancy by the state should be taken into account. Differentiation between 'war of liberation' and 'religious fundamentalism' should be made.
- Drawing conclusion of the first session, the Chair said that the rise of religious militancy, fanaticism, and intolerance destabilized harmony of the society. Bigotry and illiteracy have taken resort to religious militancy. He stressed that economic and social disparities have to be significantly reduced and simultaneously impart education on secularism, tolerance and humanist issues.

**Working Session II:**

Three papers were presented in the second working session titled *Genesis, Sources and Nature of Religious Militancy in South Asia* by Mr. Balraj Puri, Mr. M. Jeremie Codron and Dr. Sasanka Perera respectively. The Session was chaired by Professor Aftab Ahmed, the then Vice Chancellor of National University, Gazipur. The presentations were followed by candid discussions among the participants. Following are the highlights of discussion:
• The statement that Islam is a utopian ideology was contested during the floor discussion. It was said that Islamic state existed in the early days of Islam, particularly during the *khilafats*. Questions and comments were made on the ideologies of different religions, and their use to attain political legitimacy in the countries of South Asia.

• Alleged Islamization of Bangladesh was also refuted in the house. It was said that military regimes in Bangladesh did not necessarily Islamize the society. Islam was rather used by them to attain political legitimacy. Referring to the pragmatism of *Jamaat-e-Islami* Bangladesh, it was observed that pragmatic and matured policy of the Islamic parties, in general, is emerging in Bangladesh.

• It was pointed out that the term 'Hindu India' divides the state rather than unites. It was also added that historically, the concept of *Bangamata* or *Bharatmata* had contextual appeal. Therefore, it would be wrong to accept them in universal sense in the context of South Asia.

• As regards religious conversion in Sri Lanka, it was viewed that certain groups are taking advantage of poverty trap to pursue their missionary activities. Question was raised how *Janata Vimukti Peramuna* (JVP) reacts to the Christian missionary activities and to the ban on religious conversion in Sri Lanka.

• The participants discussed whether religion was the main factor in the decolonization and partition of the subcontinent. It was observed that the current political use of religion in South Asia is the fallout of unplanned decolonization process. It was mentioned that the separation of the subcontinent in 1947 was not centred only on Hindu-Muslim issue. Other issues were also prominent. In this regard, the desire of the Dravidians to have a greater *Tamil Eelam* was mentioned.
The role of religion during the Liberation War of Bangladesh and its role in the post-independence foreign policy of Bangladesh also got attention in the floor discussion. In this regard, it was said that religion was neither used nor condemned during the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. In the post-liberation constitution of Bangladesh, secularism was incorporated as one of the state principles. However, the initial foreign policy of the new state emphasized the need to develop good relations with the Muslim world.

The Chair of the session concluded that South Asia is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic region. There is the need to ensure equal status and dignity of all people irrespective of religious or ethnic identities. However, he cautioned against the abuse or misuse of religion that may threaten the regional security.

Working Session III:

In the third working session titled Religious Militancy and Inter-State Relations in South Asia, two papers were presented by Dr. Christian Wagner and Dr. Santishree Pandit respectively. Justice Mustafa Kamal, former Chief Justice of Bangladesh, chaired the session.

Following the presentation, the house debated on some of the points that the participants felt are not appropriate in the context of South Asia. In the first place, it was agreed upon that there is no permanent confrontation among the religious communities in the region. As India figured prominently in the presentation, it was argued that the country being pluralistic in nature with multiple religious, castes, languages and ethnic groups, no particular religious symbol could be attributed to it. Moreover, religious militancy in whatever form it exists in India is to be understood in the context of the complex caste politics existing in the country. The terminologies like Islamic
socialism, religious fundamentalism, clash of civilizations were contested across the floor. Islam has its own socio-economic system as opposed to the one envisaged in a socialistic model. It was also observed that fundamentalism is not a negative connotation as every religion is based on a belief system supported by few fundamental tenets. It was also argued that the Clash of Civilisations is a distorted academic work only to aggravate the mutual distrust and tension between the followers of different faiths.

- The house also pointed out that religion was not at all a factor at the root of problem in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. The problem was the consequence of ethno-politics. The trouble arose when the 1972 constitution of Bangladesh incorporated the principle of Bengali nationalism.

- The house debated whether religion has any influence on foreign policy. Citing the example of the development of Indo-Israel relations and India-Pakistan rivalry over Kashmir, one view suggested that religion has the influence on foreign policy. The other suggested that it is not religion but strategic interests that determine the development of Indo-Israel relations.

- The Chair of the session, in his concluding remarks, said that discussion should not be confined to only religious militancy, but also to secular militancy. He foresees that there is no possibility of Indo-Bangladesh or Indo-Pak war on the ground of religion. The Chair was critical of West’s double standard toward religious militancy that exists therein and religious militancy that exists in other parts of the world.

**Working Session IV:**

Three papers were presented at the fourth working session titled *South Asian Countries’ Response to ‘War on Terrorism’ and Its Fall Out on Regional Security* by
Mr. Syed Adnan Ali Shah Bukhari, Professor Dr. Hans G. Kippenberg and Dr. Jean-Luc Racine respectively. The session was chaired by Dr. Mizanur Rahman Shelly, Chairperson, Centre for Development Research Bangladesh, Dhaka.

The attention of the house was drawn to such queries as the primacy of geo-economics rather than of geopolitics in the US foreign policy calculation or the sidetracking of nuclear issues in the region by prioritizing the Afghan issues. Although the war on terrorism might have added few new geopolitical inputs to the South Asian political tapestry, it seems all the participants could not ignore the various issues of insecurity in the region, in particular, between India and Pakistan. In this respect the issue of Kashmir got prominence. The house transmitted the message that it is not only religious militancy in South Asia that is the source of insecurity, but there are other factors as well to foster insecurity in the region. Following is the summary of the discussion:

- The house was in consensus that any explanation of the spiritual manual of the 9/11 perpetrators cannot be based on any document produced by any particular quarter. The House opined that peace and forgiveness are central to Islamic philosophy and those who committed the 9/11 act did it for political reasons rather than for the cause of Islam per se.

- It was viewed that fanatics constitute only 1% - 2% of Muslim population. There should be a research on why this insignificant portion of Muslim population has been explaining Islam in a fanatic way.

- The participants also suggested avoiding misinterpretations of some facts in the history of Islam. In this regard, it was said that Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him) left Mecca not because that he was scared of the Quraish, but the fact is that he left for Medina at the invitation of Jewish
community who constituted the majority of the population inhabiting in Medina at that time. And another fact is that no where in the Medina Charter, the term 'Islamic' was mentioned. It was the Prophet (Peace be Upon Him) who ensured good governance in Medina ensuring peace and harmony in that part of the Arabia.

**Working Session V:**

Three papers were presented in the fifth working session titled, *Dealing with Religious Militancy in South Asia: Civil Society and Interfaith Dialogue* by Professor Syed Anwar Husain, Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer and Mr. Keshav Raj Jha respectively. The session was presided over by Professor K. M. Mohsin, Member, Bangladesh University Grants Commission, Dhaka.

Following are the key points of floor discussion that was stimulated by the three presentations:

- The house discussed the origins of democracy in the subcontinent from historical perspective. It was said that democracy in the region has not been necessarily the fallout of British colonial rule. There was an organized civilization in the sub-continent and democracy was a part of that ancient civilization.
- Some interpretations of history by Indian political leaders sometimes violate actual history of India. It was suggested to interpret Indian history based on, among other, Aryan migration.
- The term 'Hindu' has a broader meaning. It should not be used with a religious bias.
- Academics should avoid scapegoating the politicians for the rise of religious extremism. It was also added that communal riots should not be mixed up with religious riot.
Interfaith dialogue will not be effective unless issues like political and social deprivations are taken into account.

The Chair concluded the session thanking the resource persons and the floor for their deliberations.

**Working Session VI**

Two papers were presented in the sixth working session titled *Dealing with Religious Militancy in South Asia: Regional and Extra-Regional Cooperation*. The presentations were made by Dr. Anindyo J. Majumdar and Dr. Ijaz Khan respectively. Professor Abdul Momin Chowdhury, the then Vice Chancellor, Prime Asia University, Dhaka, presided over the session.

The highlights of the floor discussion pertinent to the theme of the session are as follows:

- Question was raised about the relevance of international or extra-regional interference without going for a regional co-operation in dealing with religious militancy. It was cautioned that replicating national action into international action would be problematic because international action is interventionist. The doctrine of 'humanitarian intervention' was cited as an example in this regard.

- The participants suggested closer cooperation among the law enforcing agencies of the countries in dealing with the problem of religious militancy.

- As regards interfaith dialogue, it was stressed that understanding only one's own religion would not be enough. Other religions with which one has to interact needs to be understood. Referring to intra-
religion division, it was also added that intra-religion dialogue is also needed.

- The Chair of the session remarked that it is the duty of the state, civil society and international bodies to address the misperceptions involving religions.

Concluding Session

Justice Latifur Rahman, former Chief Advisor, Caretaker Government of Bangladesh was the Chief Guest in the concluding session of the conference. The session was chaired by Ambassador Mufleh R. Osmany, Chairman, Board of Governors of BIJSS. Justice Latifur Rahman said that combined regional effort and cooperation among the SAARC countries would be of great importance to check terrorism and religious extremism in the country. South Asian countries must maintain religious harmony and tolerance in the interest of internal and collective security with a view to ensuring a well coordinated socio-economic development. He regretted that there are no cohesive or coordinated efforts on the part of the governments of the region to come to an accord to ensure religious tolerance and deal with militancy.

Session for the Youth

The last day of the conference was devoted to the young scholars. Mr. Mahbubul Alam, editor of *The Independent* presided over the session. In his presentation, Mr. Ehsanul Haque, Assistant Professor of the Department of International Relations, Dhaka University stated that religious militancy has been a perplexing yet very powerful phenomenon that has disturbed the peace in the region of South Asia particularly since the 1980s. He said that though every religion promotes peace and fellow feelings, numerous conflicts have time and again occurred in the
name of religion. He pointed out that there is at present hardly any country where religion is not a dominating factor. He said that because of the colonial legacy, indigenous democratic norms could not take roots in the region leading to much confusion and mutual distrust between the different communities. He suggested that education and dialogue are necessary to solve the problem of militancy.

The presentation was followed by a lively open discussion. The house felt that intellectual honesty is essential while indulging in discourse about the issue. It was pointed out that when the secular political parties fail to deliver the goods, a sense of deprivation is created which is exploited by vested quarters. Different religious extremist groups take advantage of the situation and push their agendas. It was also stressed that it is not religion but politics which is at the base of extremism. Rounding up the session, Mr. Mahbubul Alam said that religion is misunderstood although the core value of every religion is peace and harmony. He said that the conference would help create better understanding among different religious groups. Mr. Alam concluded that in the US and other countries, inter-faith dialogues and discussions are common and expressed the hope that it would be emulated in the countries of the region of South Asia too.