Bangladesh Enterprise Institute and **Saferworld**

Safety and security in North Bengal, Bangladesh

A youth perception survey

Security in South Asia

March 2012

Safety and security in North Bengal, Bangladesh

A youth perception survey

Acknowledgements

Acronyms

BDHS	Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey
BEI	Bangladesh Enterprise Institute
BIPSS	Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies
FGD	Focus group discussion
IED	Improvised explosive device
JMB	Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh
KII	Key informant interview
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SALW	Small arms and light weapons
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
UK	United Kingdom

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Foreword

THERE IS AN INCREASING RECOGNITION that a secure environment is a precondition for development. Armed violence, insecurity and poverty are often inter-connected and not only undermine individual security but also impede progress towards the eradication of poverty. Over the past decade, there has been a perceived increase in incidents of violence, including armed violence, in North Bengal, Bangladesh. The prevalence of armed groups and incidences of violence and crime threaten community safety and security in a region which has often been identified as vulnerable to instability and insecurity.

However, there have been no recent empirical studies that have explored perceptions of young women and men in North Bengal regarding safety and security and future options for creating a secure and stable region. Perceptions of the youth are important since they are the future leaders who will determine the future course of their country in both ideological and socio-political development terms. The principal aim of this study is to develop a better understanding of perceived and actual trends in insecurity and ways to address them as seen from the hearts and minds of young people in North Bengal.

I would like to thank Rosy Cave, Chamila Hemmathagama, Neila Husain and Evelyn Vancollie at Saferworld for their advice and contributions to this project. At BEI, thanks go to Humayun Kabir, Faiz Sobhan, Dipta Chakma, Asish Banik, Ayreen Khan, Moynul Haque and Sumaiya Nour who have made this project possible by contributing their time, effort and enthusiasm.

Farooq Sobhan
President
BEI

Executive summary

THIS REPORT PRESENTS THE FINDINGS of field research undertaken in Bangladesh between November 2010 and April 2011 into youth[1] perceptions of safety and security in North Bengal in Bangladesh, including concerns associated with violent extremism.[2]

This study addresses safety and security in North Bengal because it has often been perceived as being a region most vulnerable to insecurity and to the influence of extremist groups. Some research has indicated that underprivileged, unemployed youths are the most likely to be targeted for recruitment by extremist groups.[3] The research presented in this report focused on ascertaining the views of young women and men on safety and security issues, recognising that responding to their perceptions, aspirations and concerns may prove the most beneficial in terms of identifying ways in which to improve safety and security in North Bengal and minimise the threat of extremist groups. It is also hoped that some of the recommendations made by the research participants and emanating from the research, in respect of how to improve security in North Bengal, will be considered by policy makers, security sector providers and other key stakeholders. Not least among these recommendations is that young people should be directly consulted on ways in which to improve safety and security in their communities and should be actively engaged in this endeavour.

Information included in this report was gathered using the following methodological tools:

- **A perception survey.** Using a random (probability) sampling technique, a series of questions were asked to 660 young men and women aged between 18 and 35 years living in 11 districts (Pabna, Natore, Rajshahi, Nawabganj, Bogra, Naogaon, Joypurhat, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Nilphamari and Panchagarh) in North Bengal. The survey was designed to provide a representative analysis of young people's perceptions of safety and security in North Bengal.

- **Focus group discussions (FGDs).** Three FGDs were conducted in the Rajshahi, Naogaon and Dinajpur Districts of North Bengal. Participants were chosen to represent a broad range of individuals, including community leaders, politicians, university and *madrassa* (religious school) students, teachers, human rights activists, lawyers, journalists and security service providers.

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1 For the purpose of the study, 'youth', 'young women and men' and 'young people' refers to people aged between 18 and 35 years of age, as defined by the National Youth Policy in Bangladesh. According to the Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey (BDHS) 2007, this segment of the population encompasses 34.2 percent of the total population.

2 The term 'extremist' is used to describe groups and individuals who have become radicalised. It is often used with reference to those who use or advocate political violence. The term 'religious extremist groups' refers to groups that have extreme views of religion and use religion as a tool to achieve their goals.

3 "Understanding Trends in Radicalization and Religious Extremism in Bangladesh" research by Saferworld and the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS), unpublished: 2009–2010.

■ **Key informant interviews (KIIs).** Sixteen KIIs were conducted in Dhaka with a broad range of policy decision makers from the Government of Bangladesh, representatives of the security sector (predominantly law enforcement and intelligence agencies) and civil society members (including journalists and lawyers).

■ **A media survey.** The analysis drew upon reports containing particular key words from a selection of four newspapers (Bangla: *Prothom Alo; New Age*. English: *The Daily Star; Shamokal*).

■ **Desk review.** A variety of secondary sources were analysed.

Highlights

Positive trends

■ 82 percent believe that their community is a safe place to live.

■ 63 percent think the crime rate is a little less than a year ago or about the same.

■ 79 percent would like to be engaged in improving safety and security in their communities.

■ 80 percent consider that religious extremism does not create insecurity in communities.

■ 92.3 percent do not believe that there has been an increase in support to religious extremist ideologies within their communities between December 2009 and November 2010.

■ Only 7.5 percent believe that there is popular support for religious extremist ideologies.

■ 89 percent are not aware of trafficking of small arms in their locality.

Fears and concerns

■ 47 percent are somewhat worried or very worried about being a victim of crime/violence.

■ 41 percent experienced a crime/violence between December 2009 and November 2010.

■ 42 percent believe politically-motivated violence is the most prevalent crime in their community.

■ 63 percent believe that small arms-related violent incidents are partially responsible for creating insecurity in their communities.

■ 59 percent consider that the emergence of religious extremism in Bangladesh has the potential to fuel violent conflict.

■ 85 percent of those who were a victim of crime between December 2009 and November 2010 did not report the incident to the police.

■ It was widely held by respondents that the state could do more to help meet basic needs, such as improve the education system (65 percent), increase employment for young people (64 percent) and meet employment demands (54 percent).

The majority of survey respondents perceive 'freedom from want' issues – unemployment, poverty, food insecurity, environmental insecurity and lack of education – as having the largest impact on their daily lives. There are however many linkages between insecurities relating to 'freedom from want' and those relating to 'freedom from fear.' Unemployment and poverty are seen by participants as key causes of crime, including robbery, murder, extortion, abductions by religious extremist groups and political cadres, personal property crimes and illegal drug use. Nonetheless a large majority of survey respondents (82 percent) believe that their area is a safe place to live and almost two-thirds (63 percent) think that the crime rate is the same or a little lower than a year ago.

However, data also suggests that most respondents feel crime affects their lives in some way and also remain afraid that they, or a member of their family, will be a victim of crime. Forty-seven percent of survey respondents are somewhat worried or very worried about becoming a victim of crime. More significantly, 41 percent of respondents experienced an incident of crime or violence between December 2009 and November 2010. This data may appear contradictory, not least given that young people are more inclined to feel that areas where they live is safe and the crime situation has improved locally. This apparent contradiction could be due to an increased awareness of and media coverage on safety and security issues including crime and a perceived increase in prevalence of safety and security concerns and violent crimes nationally. However, a considerable majority of those who had experienced crime chose not to report it to the police (85 percent), often considering

the matter to be a personal or family matter (46 percent), preferring to deal with the matter themselves (18 percent) or because they felt they did not suffer any loss or damage (12 percent). There were also some who said the reason they did not report such incidents to the police was because they had little confidence in the police (11 percent) or feared reprisals by the perpetrators (14 percent).

Politically-motivated crime is perceived to be the most common crime by 42 percent of survey respondents (although 42.6 percent of women cited sexual harassment – locally known as eve-teasing[4] – as being the most prevalent crime), closely followed by property-related crimes, sexual harassment of girls, extortion and drug use. These concerns were shared by FGD and KII participants, who also spoke of their concerns about the porous borders with neighbouring countries and the risks associated with the smuggling of arms, drugs and other illicit goods. The easy availability of small arms and their use by extremist groups was also highlighted as a security concern by some of the research participants. Similarly, the apparent widespread use of drugs was seen as particularly worrying, especially the security implications associated with drug use and the illicit drug trade, not least drug-related crimes and family and community disintegration. Only 4.4 percent of survey respondents believed religiously-motivated violence is prevalent. However the media survey findings suggest that a number of religious extremist groups are very active in North Bengal.

When the survey respondents were asked what their priority needs are, most cited livelihood opportunities (74 percent), education opportunities (60 percent), improved law and order (65 percent) and better access to security and justice (59 percent). FGD participants repeatedly raised the need for improved law and order and the need to create livelihood opportunities for young people. Many felt that the state was not doing enough to meet these basic needs and that civil society could take a more active role in this regard. It was widely felt that unemployment and weaknesses in the education system (both mainstream and madrassa) can create the conditions conducive to the escalation of crime and also the proliferation of extremist groups.

Taking advantage of widespread poverty and unemployment, it was felt by many of the research participants that, in order to solicit support and recruit new members, extremist groups offer financial and other incentives to young people in particular who may be especially frustrated in these conditions. It was also considered that extremist groups have benefited from the easy availability of small arms and explosives, and also by the strong religious beliefs held by a wide section of the community, which are similarly taken advantage of by extremist groups looking to solicit support.

However, very few people (7.5 percent of survey respondents) considered that extremist ideologies have much support in their communities. Nor did they believe that the level of support is increasing among young people at the time of research (7.7 percent). Similarly, most people (80 percent) do not believe the existence of extremist groups adversely impacts on community safety and security. Nonetheless, a majority of people (59 percent) do feel that the existence of extremist groups has the potential to fuel violent conflict in Bangladesh. This apparent contradiction could be explained by a perceived increase in the prevalence of violent extremism nationally and media coverage on the extent of the threat posed by extremist groups. This coverage presents a picture of considerable activity on the part of law enforcement agencies responding to activities of extremist groups and reports of arrests of members of extremist groups rarely leave the news media. Knowledge among research participants of some of the objectives, activities and recruitment methods of extremist groups also attests to the extent of the problem.

Importantly, research has indicated ways in which the crime, violence and other forms of insecurity associated with extremist groups can be better dealt with, including ways

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4 A euphemism for sexual harassment and abuse of girls and young women often by groups of young men in public places. It is also known as *jouno hoirani* in Bangla. The term is controversial because it appears to trivialise the problem. In Bangladesh, this kind of abuse in the form of teasing and stalking often leads to girls dropping out of school and marrying young and has been a cause of suicide.

in which to reintegrate into society those who have left extremist groups. Many survey respondents (42 percent) complained that little has been done to tackle the insecurity and incidents of violence and crime caused by extremist groups in their local areas. Many research participants suggested that the capacity of law enforcement agencies needs to be increased. Many recognised that there needs to be many more employment opportunities, particularly for young people. It was also widely considered necessary to reform the mainstream and madrassa education systems. It was recommended that poverty reduction programmes and awareness-raising initiatives be developed and implemented as well.

Most importantly, it is evident from the research that the young women and men in North Bengal are keen to actively contribute to improving the security and safety of their communities. Many respondents recognised that an effective strategy in countering insecurity and the threat of extremist groups lies in a collaborative approach engaging all stakeholders, including government authorities, law enforcement agencies, civil society, the media, families, communities and the general public at large.

Recommendations

Based upon the research conducted for this report, a number of key recommendations are made, not least among these is the need to conduct further research in this area to corroborate some of the findings, develop some of the analyses and provide more detailed recommendations. The research sample size for this report was very small. It only provides an initial snapshot of safety and security in North Bengal. Further research could be conducted to capture a greater number of perspectives. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the findings and recommendations may prove useful and be built upon in the near future in order to improve the security and quality of lives of the people in North Bengal and further afield.

- Engage key stakeholders in responding to safety and security concerns as well as threats of violent extremism, including young women and men, wider civil society, the media, families and communities, the security sector and government administrations.

- Promote community security initiatives as a preventive mechanism to counter the threat of insecurity including violent extremism and ensure that vulnerable groups (such as women, children and youth) are not exploited by criminals or extremist groups who take advantage of their vulnerability, lack of awareness, poverty or unemployment.

- Develop and implement an education reform programme that addresses the weaknesses of both the *madrassa* and mainstream education systems and particularly ensures students are equipped with the skills and knowledge that will give them the best chance of securing gainful employment.

- Develop and implement employment generation and poverty reduction programmes, particularly for young people.

- Create ways in which the frustration of young people can be legitimately vented and leisure time can be productively spent by means of support networks, recreational clubs and activities. Other platforms could also be developed for more frequent and healthier interactions among the youths and also with others in the society.

- Develop and implement awareness-raising initiatives, with the objective of familiarising communities with the threats associated with insecurity including crime and violent extremism and familiarising young people with concepts such as social responsibility. Such awareness programmes should aim to discourage people from engaging in crime/violence or joining extremist groups, and identify where support

can be found if required. The mass media should be utilised in this regard, alongside cultural programmes with local actors and artists, for instance.

■ In order to improve safety and security in North Bengal, the efforts of law enforcement agencies in dealing with public security concerns, including the threat of violent extremism and monitoring and preventing the flow of small arms and light weapons (SALW) within and into Bangladesh, require reinforcement by the Government.

■ Sensitisation programmes, such as participatory workshops and seminars, should be organised for members of law enforcement agencies, local government authorities and young people to build trust and confidence as well as tackle issues of safety and security and better understand each other's perspectives.

■ Efforts to counter safety and security concerns in North Bengal should be placed firmly in the context of national and regional strategies to improve the law and order situation as well as strategies to tackle poverty and socio-economic backwardness. Efforts should be made to promote comprehensive and holistic approaches to address these concerns, secure national and regional support for efforts in North Bengal and, through so doing, increase the likely success of such efforts.

1

Introduction

Background

BANGLADESH WITNESSED VIOLENT EXTREMISM deriving from religiously motivated violence. The series of bomb blasts in 2005 appears to have marked a sharp and spectacular rise in religious extremism and its destructive activities.[5] Today, according to different media reports, Bangladesh is thought to be a home to many extremist groups.[6] As a result, violent extremism has emerged as a priority security concern for Bangladesh.

North Bengal of Bangladesh, composed of 16 districts, has often been perceived as being most vulnerable to insecurity and to the influence of extremist groups and the associated security threats this presents. Some research has indicated that the northern part of Bangladesh has experienced rising levels of violence in recent years, marked by a fairly high and steadily increasing number of incidents involving the use of small arms and explosives, including murder, rape and armed robbery.[7] A study conducted by the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) with support from Saferworld[8] suggested that unemployed youths from underprivileged segments of society are the most likely to be targeted by extremist groups hoping to recruit them, often by providing financial and other incentives. Given the perceived increase in extremism, particularly the vulnerability of young men and women to recruitment by extremist groups, the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) with technical and financial support from Saferworld, conducted a study between November 2010 and April 2011 on the perceptions of young women and men on safety and security in North Bengal. The study focused upon the perceived threat of public insecurity, including extremist groups – notably religious extremist groups, and the associated insecurities this represents. This report presents the key findings of the study.

For the purpose of the study, 'youth' refers to women and men aged between 18 and 35 years of age, as defined by the National Youth Policy in Bangladesh. According to the Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey (BDHS) 2007, this segment of the population encompasses 34.2 percent of the total population. It is hoped that by revealing some of the perceptions, aspirations and concerns of the youth in North Bengal, this study will benefit those endeavouring to improve the security and the quality of life for the people of North Bengal and further afield. It is hoped that the recommendations made

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5 On 17 August 2005, about 500 bombs were detonated in 63 of the 64 districts of Bangladesh. The bombs exploded within a half hour period beginning at 11:30. The terrorist organisation, Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) claimed to be responsible for these explosions. The group, led by Shaykh Abdur Rahman and Siddiqur Rahman (also known as Bangla Bhai), is allegedly affiliated to Al Qaeda. Another terrorist group, Harkat-Ul Jihad al Islami (HuJI) was also associated with JMB in the execution of the attack. Following the attack, both groups were banned by the Government of Bangladesh (South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) (2010), 'Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB)', SATP website www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/bangladesh/terroristoutfits/JMB.htm, accessed on 11 December 2010)

6 A media survey was conducted over 12 months for the purposed of this research. Details of the media survey are found in the methodology section of the introduction and the annex.

7 Wadood, N. *Countering Terrorism – A Regional Perspective: Case of Rajshahi Division*. Sobhan, F.(ed). "Trends in Militancy in Bangladesh: Possible Responses" UPL: Dhaka:2010 p 67

8 "Understanding Trends in Radicalization and Religious Extremism in Bangladesh" research by Saferworld and the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS), unpublished: 2009–2010.

by the research participants and emanating from the research, in respect of how to improve security in North Bengal, will be considered by policy makers, security sector providers and other key stakeholders. Not least among these recommendations is that young people should be directly consulted on ways in which to improve safety and security in their communities and should be actively engaged in this endeavour.

Methodology

Research was conducted using the following methodological tools:

- **A perception survey that was held from 23–25 December 2010.** Using a random (probability) sampling technique a series of questions were asked to 660 young men and women aged between 18 and 35 years living in 11 districts (Pabna, Natore, Rajshahi, Nawabganj, Bogra, Naogaon, Joypurhat, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Nilphamari and Panchagarh) in North Bengal. The survey was designed to provide a representative analysis of youth perceptions of safety and security in North Bengal.

- **Focus group discussions (FGDs).** Three FGDs were conducted in the Rajshahi, Naogaon and Dinajpur Districts of North Bengal. Participants were chosen to represent a broad range of individuals, including community leaders, politicians, university and *madrassa* (religious school) students, teachers, human rights activists, lawyers, journalists and security service providers.

- **Key informant interviews (KIIs).** Sixteen KIIs were conducted in Dhaka with a broad range of policy decision makers from the Government of Bangladesh, representatives of the security sector (predominantly law enforcement and intelligence) and civil society members (including journalists and lawyers).

- **A media survey.** The analysis drew upon reports containing particular key words from a selection of four newspapers (Bangla: *Prothom Alo; Shamokal*. English: *The Daily Star; New Age*).

- **Desk review.** A variety of secondary sources were analysed.

More detailed information on the methodology can be found in the Annex.

Structure of the report

The next section of the report considers perceptions of safety and security among the young women and men in North Bengal, including general perceptions of security and the fear and experience of crime. It also looks at the perceptions about the nature and activities of religious extremist groups in North Bengal and associated threats this represents. The report ends with conclusions and recommendations based on the research findings.

2

Perceptions of safety and security among the youth in North Bengal

**General perceptions of safety and security**

THE SURVEY ENDEAVOURED to ascertain the level of crime and violence as perceived and experienced by the youth in North Bengal. In terms of the general perception of security, as figure 1 shows, most people surveyed believe the rate of crime and violence is about the same (43 percent) or has fallen (37 percent) in November 2010 compared with December 2009.

Figure 1: The level of criminal and violent incidents in November 2010 compared with December 2009
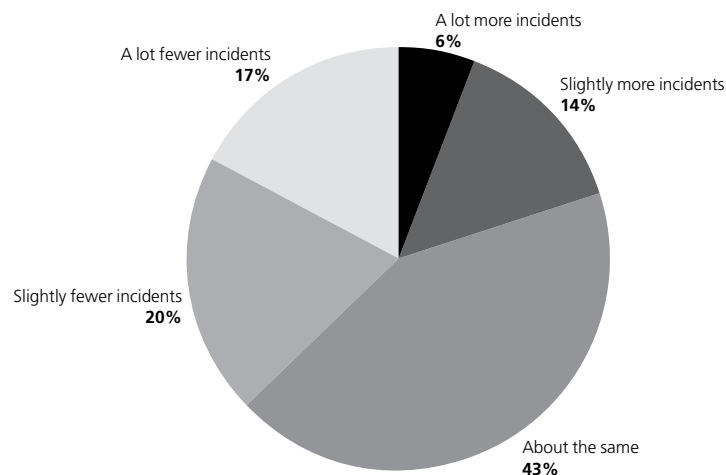
While this perception is shared among the male and female respondents, this perception does vary between districts. For instance, while only six percent of respondents consider that the rate of crime and violence has markedly risen between December 2009 and November 2010, a significant proportion of respondents in Rajshahi, Panchagarh and Joypurhat believe this to be so. In these districts, a greater proportion (18.3 percent, 14 percent and 14 percent, respectively) believes that there are many more incidents of crime and violence in 2010 compared with 2009 year. This is in contrast to Naogaon District, where only two percent of the respondents believe that the rate of crime and violence has increased a lot, whereas a significant eighty percent believe the rate has decreased (see figure 2).

Figure 2: The level of criminal and violent incidents in November 2010 compared with December 2009, by district
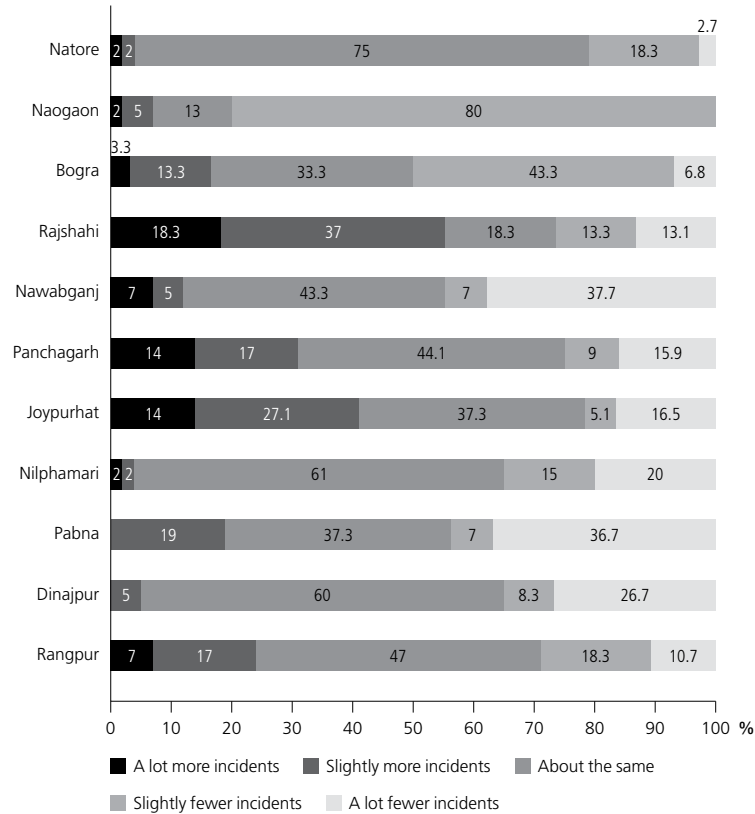
Across all survey respondents, the crimes that are believed to occur with the most frequency are politically-motivated violence (cited by 42 percent of respondents), personal property crimes (38 percent), sexual harassment (30.4 percent), extortion (27 percent) and drug use (23.4 percent). Of particular note is the fact that significantly more women than men responded that sexual harassment frequently occurs (42.6 percent compared with 25 percent). They also reported that rape occurs more frequently (17.8 percent of female respondents compared with 12.7 percent of male respondents). Only 4.4 percent of survey respondents believe religiously-motivated violence is prevalent.

Regarding other forms of insecurity, those who participated in FGDs and KIIs highlighted socio-economic and environmental threats, including the food crisis, acute poverty, lack of education, lack of employment opportunities, lack of natural resources and river erosion. All these threats are seen as contributing to the escalation of property-related crime, robbery, murder, extortion and abduction.

Another commonly reported concern was the use and availability of illicit drugs. It is commonly believed that there is widespread drug use in the communities of North Bengal. This has contributed to considerable insecurity in the region, as a result of the social ills that are often caused by the illegal drug trade and drug use, including breakdown of family units, social unrest, suicide, murder and other crimes. There may also be a direct correlation between the use of drugs and prevalence of small arms in an area, although this requires further investigation. As mentioned by the research respondents, the most commonly used drugs in North Bengal are phensidyle[9] cannabis, heroin and yaba.[10] In addition to the extent of the problem, respondents also indicated the apparent futility of any action that could be taken to counter the threat associated with the illicit drugs trade, as expressed by one FGD participant:

"The night coaches halt in some places near the railway station. Smugglers drop cartons loaded with drugs onto the train. These stocks are carried by local train, in front of

9   A cough medicine high in codeine and other opiates produced in India but illegal in Bangladesh.
10   *Yaba* (a Thai word) is a tablet which is a powerful stimulant that is synthetically produced.

everybody. No one can say anything about it out of fear of death and harassment. There is no one to whom to complain about the matter."

FGD participant, Dinajpur

Fear and experience of crime

A significant majority of survey respondents (82 percent) consider their locality to be safe. Nonetheless, FDG participants highlighted the security risks associated with the porous border with India, including the smuggling of arms, drugs and other goods. Research indicates that smuggling of illicit items compounds the risk of other forms of crime associated with drugs and small arms.[11] The smuggling of other goods carries its own security risks in the form of undermining legitimate business opportunities and means of sustenance for many local communities.

While the vast majority of survey respondents consider their locality to be safe, significantly fewer people do not fear becoming a victim of crime. This data may appear contradictory, not least given that young people are more inclined to feel that areas where they live are safe and the crime situation has improved locally. This apparent contradiction can be explained by an increased awareness of and media coverage on safety and security concerns and a perceived increase in the prevalence of violent crimes nationally. Only 9 percent responded that they did not feel worried at all about becoming a victim of crime, whereas 44 percent said they are not very worried, 34 percent said somewhat worried and 13 percent said they are very worried (see figure 3).

Figure 3: The level of fear of crime
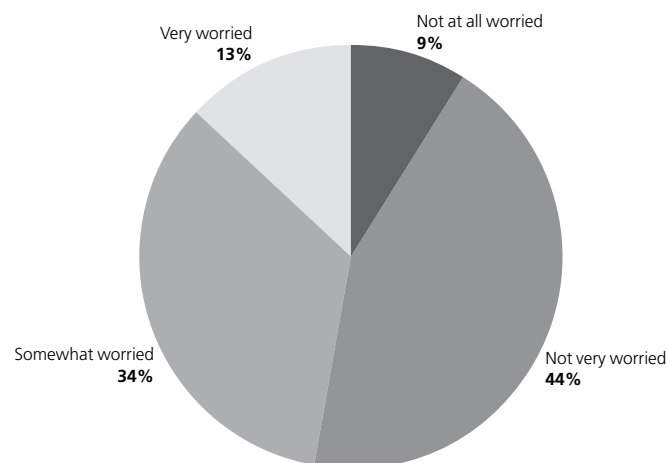
While 47 percent of survey respondents said that they were somewhat or very worried about becoming a victim of crime, a slightly smaller percentage (41 percent) said that they had been the victim of crime over the past year. A number of respondents said that they were the victim of personal property crimes, including theft, burglary, robbery and mugging (19.1 percent) and 12.2 percent of respondents stated that they have been the victim of politically-motivated crime and extortion (12.3 percent of males and 11.9 percent of females). Nonetheless, by far the most commonly experienced crime reported by survey respondents was sexual harassment, where 30.2 percent of female respondents reported having been a victim of this crime over the past year.

It is commonly perceived that there is a strong correlation between poor socio-economic conditions, notably high unemployment, and crime and violence. As described by one FGD participant:

11 BEI research – see list of references in the annex.

"Unemployment is the main problem that is creating frustration among the youth, which leads them towards various criminal activities like eve teasing, drug taking, stealing, killing, political clashes, abduction, extremism and suicide."

FGD participant, Rajshahi

Poverty and unemployment make people vulnerable to extremist ideologies as experienced by some of the community members. One participant in a FGD shared his experience of being a victim of extortion:

"When I refused to give them money they hit me with a hammer. When I became unconscious they threw my body in a place where they dump dead bodies. There was another man in the training camp who was hung upside down from a tree and was hammered by the members of an extremist group."

FGD participant, Rajshahi

Reporting incidents of violence

Of those who were a victim of crime in the past year, the majority (85 percent) did not report the incident to the police. Reasons given for not reporting an incident of crime to the police included: the incident being a private or family matter (46 percent), some dealt with the matter themselves (18 percent), some feared reprisals by the perpetrators (14 percent), some never experienced any loss or damage (12 percent) and some said they did not report the incident to the police because they had little confidence in the police (11 percent) – see figure 4.

Figure 4: Reasons for not reporting crimes to the police[12]
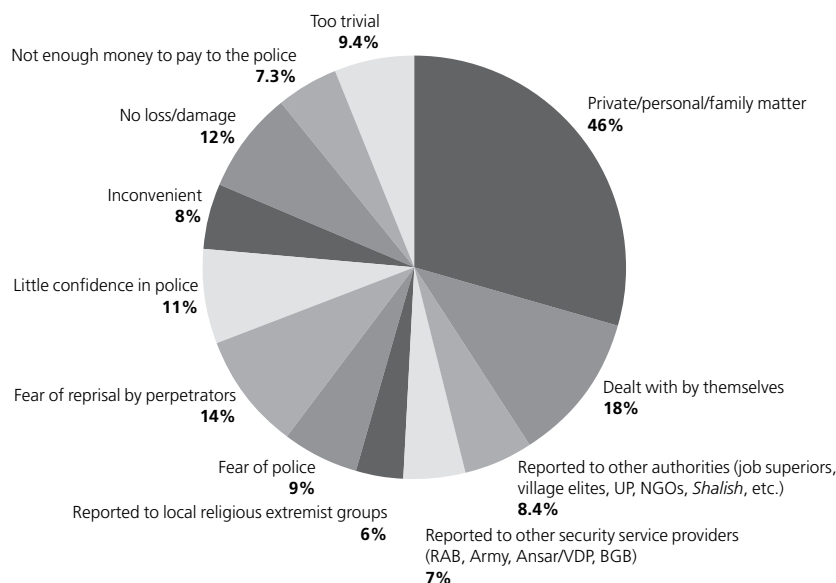
According to the survey results, women are much more likely not to report an incident to the police because they consider the matter to be private (60.3 percent of female respondents have this reason compared with 37.4 percent of male respondents) or because they thought it would be too much trouble (10.3 of female respondents percent compared with 6.5 percent of male respondents). On the other hand, men appear more likely to deal with the matter themselves (22 percent of male respondents compared with 10.3 percent of female respondents), consider the matter too trivial to warrant reporting (12.2 percent of male respondents compared with 4.4 percent of female respondents) or believe they have suffered no loss or damage (14.6 percent of male respondents compared with 7.4 percent of female respondents).

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12 *Shalish* is a traditional community-level dispute resolution mechanism.

Religious extremist groups

Very few survey respondents (7.5 percent) considered that extremist ideologies have much support in their communities. Similarly only 7.7 believe that the level of support is increasing among young people at the time of research. Most people (80 percent) do not believe the existence of extremist groups adversely impacts on community safety and security. Moreover, 92 percent do not believe that there has been an increase in support to religious extremist ideologies within their communities over the past year. Nonetheless, a majority of people (59 percent) do feel that the existence of extremist groups has the potential to fuel violent conflict in Bangladesh (figure 6). Although appearing contradictory, this can be explained by the perceived increase in the prevalence of violent extremism nationally and media coverage on the extent of the threat posed by extremist groups. The media presents a picture of considerable activity on the part of law enforcement agencies responding to activities of extremist groups and reports of arrests of members of extremist groups rarely leave the news media. The media survey similarly presents an image of very active law enforcement agencies dealing with threats from extremist groups. The survey also indicates that a key driver of insecurity in the districts of North Bengal is the growing number of extremist groups[13] and the pervasiveness of criminal and violent activities (e.g. property-related crimes, extortion and politically-motivated crimes) that are carried out by several of these groups. Their reach is also bolstered by the apparent ready availability of arms. Being a border area, North Bengal is particularly vulnerable to the effects of the smuggling of arms, drugs and other goods.

This picture appears to be endorsed by KII participants, as expressed by one interviewee:

"The present Government is determined in its efforts to combat terrorism. A lot of militants have been arrested with the help of the public and their companions were caught and arrested later by interrogating the arrestees. The Government has been able to tackle militancy to a great extent; however, the problem is still there. The Government lacks the capacity needed for countering terrorism. At this moment there is one police officer for every 2,500 people."
**KII interviewee, Dhaka**

One research participant emphasised the fact that a comprehensive approach to dealing with the insecurities associated with extremist groups is required and the answer does not simply lie in one area:

"Instead of reactive approaches, proactive approaches are necessary in tackling terrorism, which includes access to education, modernisation of education, introduction of vocational education, poverty eradication, increase of employment opportunities, improvement in the law and order system, and combating corruption within the government."
RAB Enforcement Officer

Research participants were asked how young people who have left extremist groups could be supported in reintegrating into civil society. Many survey respondents (37 percent) and FGD and KII participants said that there should be a formal reintegration and rehabilitation strategy that should be jointly owned and implemented by the justice and security service providers and civil society to facilitate the reintegration of former members of extremist groups into society. Many survey respondents (46.3 percent) also said that communities should be aware of how they could help in the reintegration process. Many also agreed that creating gainful employment opportunities would help (55.2 percent), as would creating opportunities to receive secular education or vocational training (44.3 percent).

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13 According to reports published in different newspapers (*The Daily Star*, *Prothom alo*, *Shamokal* and *New Age*) during the media survey, there are as many as eight active extremist groups in North Bengal.

Figure 5: Whether the emergence of extremism in Bangladesh has the potential to fuel conflict

Legend: ■ Yes ■ No □ Do not know
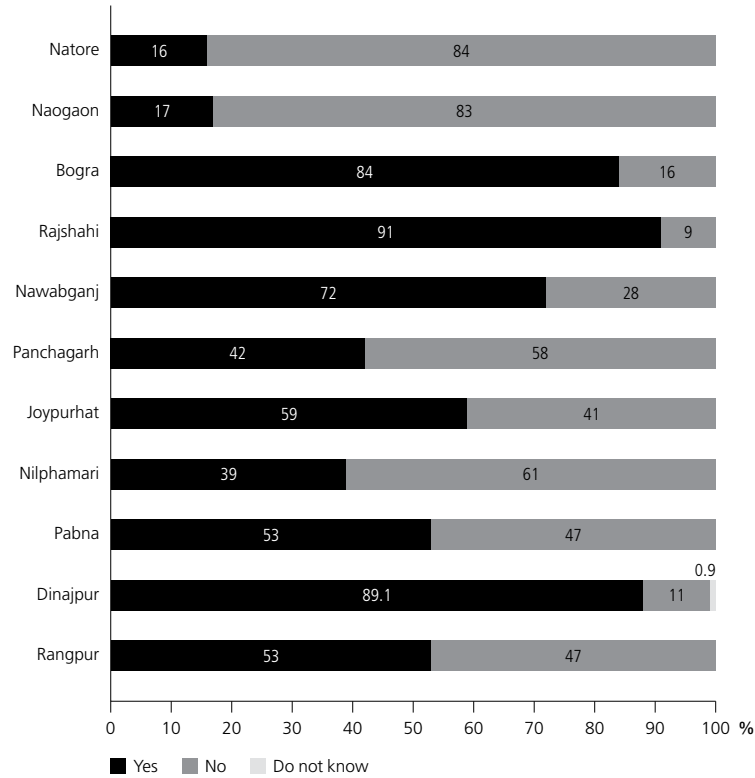
Objectives of religious extremist groups

When asked what they consider to be the objectives of extremist groups, many survey respondents (34 percent) believe a primary objective to be to disrupt society, while others (33 percent) believe the objective to be to establish an Islamic state in Bangladesh – see figure 6. The latter was widely reflected in the news media stories analysed during the research. Some KII participants said that religious extremists specifically target North Bengal with two broad objectives: to have regular contact with supporters of their ideology in neighbouring countries and to facilitate the smuggling of small arms and other goods to enable to them to carry out their subversive activities in Bangladesh.

Figure 6: Objectives of religious extremist groups
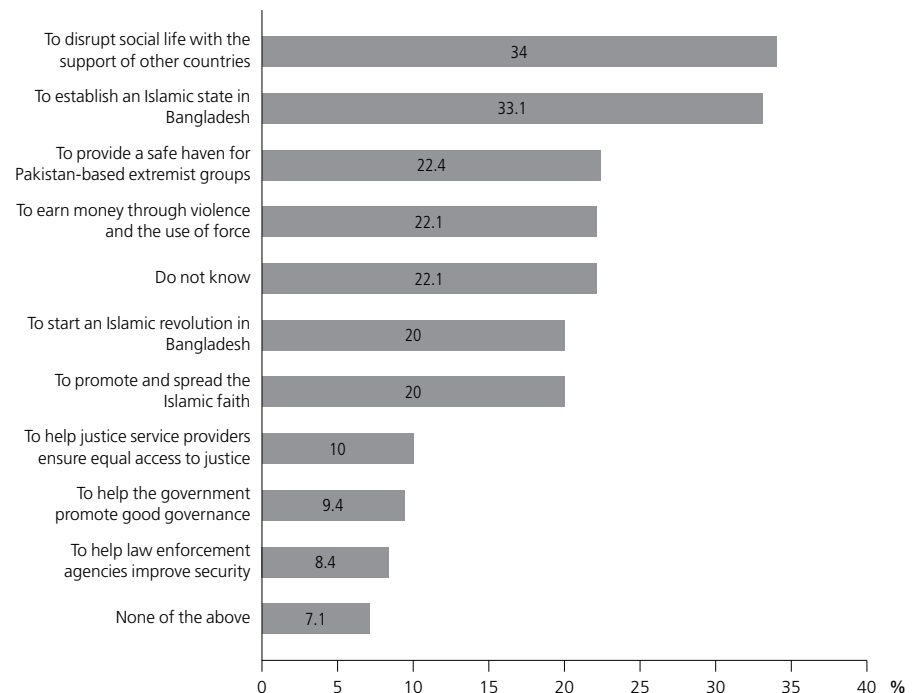
Types of activities undertaken by religious extremist groups

Of those who responded to the question about the nature of activities carried out by members of extremist groups (168 participants),[14] many (33 percent) said that they recruit new members, while others said they hold internal meetings or gatherings (21 percent), engage people in violent acts (17 percent), organise special meetings or events (16 percent), conduct classes for members on their objectives and ideology (13.1 percent), help local people by giving money and volunteering for community work (12 percent), impose restrictions on women (such as wearing a veil, not going to school or work or not going out unless accompanied by a male family member – 11.3 percent, including 21.4 percent of the female respondents), visit mosques and other places of social gathering to mingle with the community (10 percent), actively take part in solving local disputes and addressing security concerns (9 percent) and provide basic services to the people, such as health, education, water, electricity, security and justice (7 percent).

Methods used to motivate people to join

Most survey participants believed that religious indoctrination was widely used to motivate people to join extremist groups (65 percent). This was reflected in KII and FGD findings as well as in a wide section of the media. It is also widely considered that poor socio-economic conditions and strongly held religious beliefs are factors which are taken advantage of by extremists and thus can contribute to an increase in the size and number of extremist groups in places such as North Bengal, where poverty is rife and there is strong religious fervour. As articulated by one research participant:

"Islamist militant groups are politically motivated. They only use the name of Islam to get acceptance by exploiting poor, uneducated, unemployed mass of Bangladesh."
FGD participant, Dinajpur

Many of the survey participants believe that people were motivated to join by extremists offering money (48.3 percent) or other incentives, such as mobile telephones (28.2 percent). A smaller percentage (17 percent) believes that methods employed by extremist groups to recruit new members include the use of threats. FGD and KII respondents also mentioned the connection between various extremist groups and *madrassas*. It was considered that these institutions, which provide poor people with an education, indoctrinate children who may have attended these institutions from a very young age.

Involvement of women with religious extremist groups

Most survey respondents (74 percent) did not think women are targeted by extremist groups for recruitment, although slightly fewer women (68 percent) held this view. Nonetheless, FGD and KII participants alluded to the active participation of women in religious extremist groups, as one FGD participant mentioned:

"There are a lot of women activists who are responsible for circulating their materials, such as CDs, posters, jihadi books and invitations for people to join their groups."
FGD participant, Rajshahi

When asked why women would join extremist groups, the most popular answer given was for the money (40.4 percent), followed by reasons including that they are related to existing members of extremist groups (34.1 percent) – which was also supported by FGD and KII participants – or they are forced to do so by family members (30 percent) or because it is easier to force women than men to join (31 percent). Other popular answers given were that joining constituted an expression of anger by those who have been deprived of equal access to political, economic and social rights in a secular society (17.2 percent) and to see positive changes in society through an Islamic state (17 percent). Women gave slightly different answers from men. Women appear

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14 No participants from Bogra, Naogaon and Natore Districts responded to this question and some participants from other districts also chose not to respond.

more likely to believe a woman joins an extremist group because she has been forced (40.2 percent), or for money (45.9 percent), or as an expression of anger by those who have been deprived of equal access to political, economic and social rights in secular society (23 percent), compared with men (24.3 percent, 37.7 percent and 14.2 percent, respectively). Men are more likely to believe a woman has joined because a family member already belongs to an extremist group (38.1 percent compared with 26.2 percent).

Needs and aspirations of young people and the role of the state

It is commonplace that people become involved with the activities that will help meet their needs and aspirations in life. With this in mind, survey respondents were asked to rank their basic needs. The most popular response was livelihood opportunities (74 percent), followed by education (69 percent) and improved law and order (65 percent) – see figure 7.

Figure 7: Basic needs
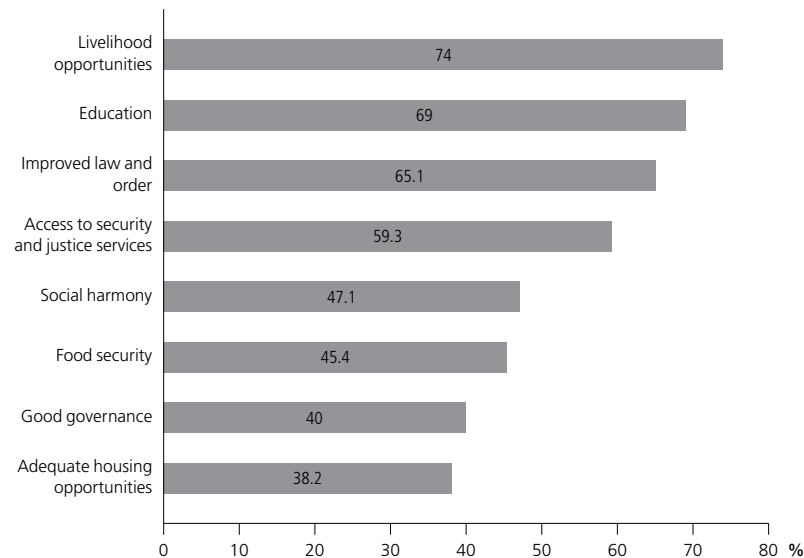
A little under a third of all survey respondents considered that there are not equal opportunities to achieve these basic needs and aspirations (29.7 percent of men and 28.1 percent of women). There were marked gender differences in the reasons given for this. While 41.2 percent of the male respondents who said there were not equal opportunities blamed political factors, no women did. Conversely, many more women blamed unemployment and a lack of education than men did (66.7 percent and 66.7 percent, respectively for women, compared with 11.8 percent and 5.9 percent, respectively, of male respondents).

It was widely held that the state could do more to help meet these basic needs. Sixty-five percent of survey respondents believe that the state should create a better education system that provides modern skills and meets the present public and private sector employment demands.

FGD and KII participants also said that the state should improve education, employment opportunities and diversified programmes for capacity development of the youth and the wider community in the northern parts of Bangladesh. Many also expressed the need to increase employment for young people (64 percent) and meet employment demands (54 percent). Similarly, 55 percent of survey respondents argued that law and order could be improved. This was endorsed by all FGD participants, who expressed the need to improve law and order in North Bengal as an immediate priority. Comparatively fewer respondents said that the state should help improve

social harmony (39 percent), improve housing opportunities (20 percent) or increase food security (18 percent).
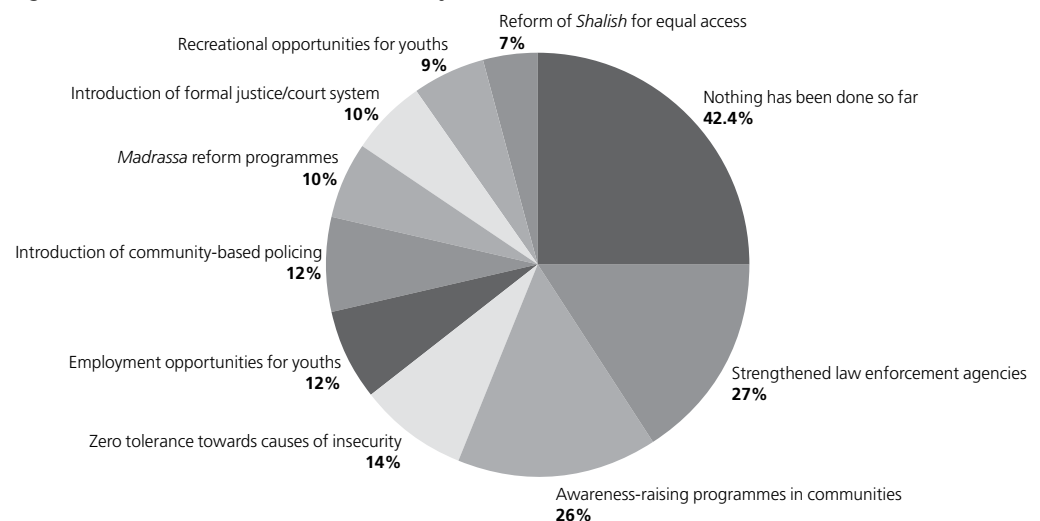
Survey respondents also considered there to be a role for civil society in helping to meet the basic needs. Well over half of the respondents expect civil society to advocate for improved law and order (67 percent), employment generation for young people in both public and private sectors (59.4 percent) and the need to strengthen the existing education system in a manner that will help them to secure gainful employment (59 percent). Young people also expect civil society to advocate for improving economic conditions and other developmental factors (45 percent), while fewer foresaw a role for civil society in generating self-employment opportunities (26 percent).

Way forward

Measures taken to curb insecurity and incidences of violence

When asked what measures have been taken to tackle the insecurity and incidents of violence and crime caused by extremist groups in their local areas, many people (42.4 percent) said that nothing has been done yet. Others mentioned a number of measures that have been taken, including the strengthening of law enforcement agencies to enable them to take preventive action (27 percent), the delivery of a number of awareness-raising programmes for local communities (26 percent) and the adherence by the security sector to a zero tolerance policy whereby those alleged to be involved in crime and extremist groups are arrested and prosecuted according to due process (14 percent) – see figure 8.

Figure 8: Measures taken to tackle insecurity and incidents of crime and violence

- Reform of *Shalish* for equal access **7%**
- Recreational opportunities for youths **9%**
- Introduction of formal justice/court system **10%**
- *Madrassa* reform programmes **10%**
- Introduction of community-based policing **12%**
- Employment opportunities for youths **12%**
- Zero tolerance towards causes of insecurity **14%**
- Nothing has been done so far **42.4%**
- Strengthened law enforcement agencies **27%**
- Awareness-raising programmes in communities **26%**

KII participants also mentioned various Government initiatives in this regard, including police reform programmes, education reform programmes, public information campaigns and legislations as efforts which have been undertaken in order to counter insecurity caused by incidences of crime and violence and the adverse security effects of extremist groups.

Suggestions to tackle violent activities

Very few people reported that they had been consulted or asked to participate in any of the activities outlined above (7.3 percent of the survey respondents). Given that awareness-raising and community outreach can form the crux of effective strategies to counter the threat of insecurity, engaging the young and other members of communities in developing and implementing strategies to counter this threat may prove to be particularly effective. It appears that a valuable resource is not being utilised, particularly given that most respondents said that they would like to be

engaged in improving safety and security in their communities (79 percent of the respondents) through such activities as raising awareness or giving advice.

When asked what they would recommend be done to tackle insecurity and incidents of crime including violent extremism, many survey respondents said that law enforcement agencies should take an active role in this regard (62.1 percent). Half of the respondents said that the capacity of the law enforcement agencies should be augmented (50 percent). Other popular answers given were to reform the *madrassa* education system (44.2 percent), reform the mainstream education system (42 percent), create employment (43.4 percent) and create an awareness of social responsibility among the youth (39 percent) – see figure 9.

Figure 9: Ways in which to tackle insecurity and incidents of crime and violence
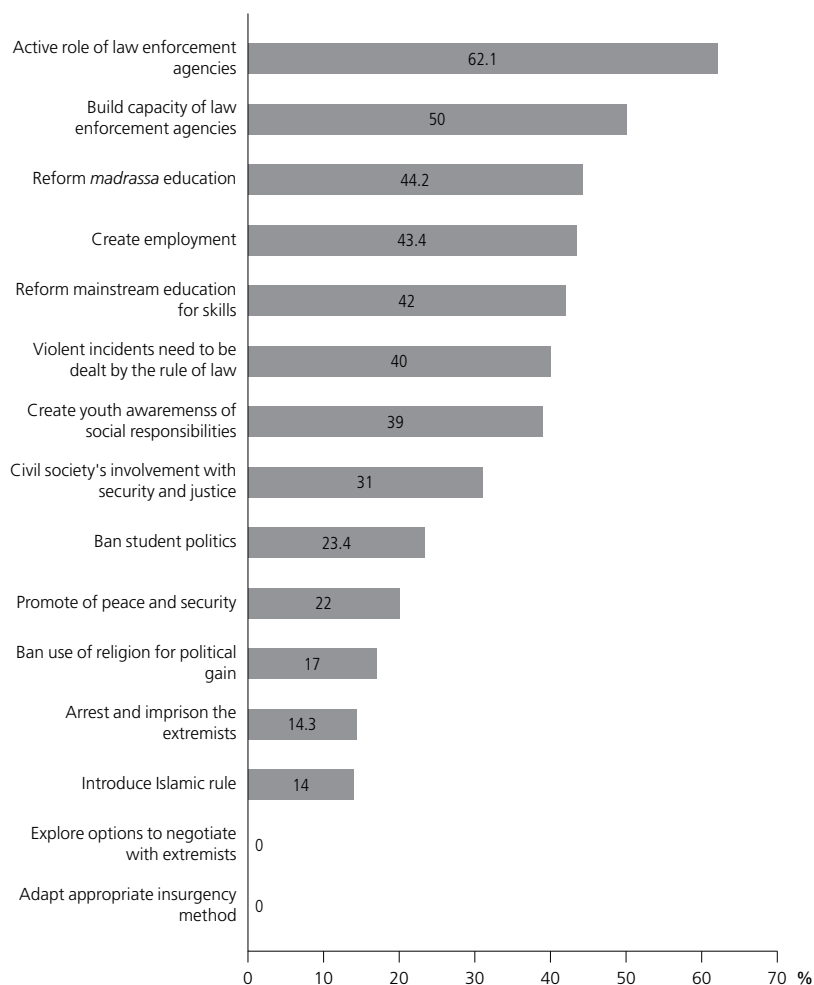
FGD and KII participants also emphasised the need to reform *madrassa* and mainstream education systems, suggesting that a modern vocational education system be established for the youth of North Bengal. FGD and KII participants also emphasised the important role of the Government, civil society, the media and families in fighting the causes and effects of insecurity including violent extremism. For instance, KII and FGD respondents wanted civil society to be more active through publications, discussions and various cultural programmes in order to motivate the general public. Families should also help educate their children on Bengali culture and Islam. The media could also help raise awareness through various campaigns and events, such as discussions, seminars, conferences and cultural programmes addressing the threat of extremist activities. It was also argued that a poverty reduction strategy should be implemented to empower a larger number of people. The Government should also have a monitoring body to observe the activities and development programmes of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) across the country. As a long-term measure, it was suggested that the Government should pursue

national security sector reform initiatives including police reforms and a national counter-terrorism strategy, which would address the growing challenges posed by insecurity, crime and violent extremism in the country. It was also suggested that counter-terrorism legislation should be included in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Charter in order to secure international and regional co-operation in dealing with these problems. Participants also advocated for the imposition of strict laws to deal with the smuggling of arms and drugs and also the adoption of legislation that would protect victims and witnesses of crime.

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Conclusions and recommendations

AS THE RESEARCH HAS DEMONSTRATED, youth perceptions on security at local level appear to have improved and almost two-thirds think that the rate of crime is the same or a little lower than a year ago. However, data also suggests that most respondents feel crime affects their lives in some way and also remain afraid that they, or a member of their family, will be a victim of crime. Politically-motivated crime is perceived to be the most common crime, while a considerable number of women cited sexual harassment – locally known as eve-teasing[15] – as being the most prevalent crime, closely followed by property-related crimes, sexual harassment of girls, extortion and drug use. A considerable majority of those who had experienced crime chose not to report it to the police, often considering the matter to be a personal or family matter, preferring to deal with the matter themselves or because they felt they did not suffer any loss or damage. Another reason they did not report such incidents to the police was because they had little confidence in the police or feared reprisals by the perpetrators.

The majority of survey respondents perceive unemployment, poverty, food insecurity, environmental insecurity and lack of education as having the largest impact on their daily lives. Unemployment and poverty are seen by participants as key causes of crime, including robbery, murder, extortion, abductions by religious extremist groups and political cadres, personal property crimes and illegal drug use.

Very few people consider that extremist ideologies have much support in their communities. Nor do they believe that the level of support is increasing. Similarly, most people do not believe the existence of extremist groups adversely impacts community safety. However, most people do feel that the existence of extremist groups has the potential to fuel violent conflict in Bangladesh. This could be due to a perceived increase in the prevalence of violent extremism at the national level and the media coverage on the threat posed by extremist groups. The news media portrays significant efforts by law enforcement agencies to respond to the activities of extremist groups.

Most importantly, the research has indicated ways in which crime, violence and other forms of insecurity associated with extremist groups can be better dealt with. It is clearly evident that the young people in North Bengal are keen to actively contribute to improving the security and safety of their communities. Nonetheless, while

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15 A euphemism for sexual harassment and abuse of girls and young women often by groups of young men in public places. It is also known as *jouno hoirani* in Bangla. The term is controversial because it appears to trivialise the problem. In Bangladesh, this kind of abuse in the form of teasing and stalking often leads to girls dropping out of school and marrying young and has been a cause of suicide.

unemployment is rife and it is widely acknowledged that impoverished, unemployed and frustrated young people are desirable targets of extremist groups looking for recruits, initiatives to counter insecurities, crime and the threat of extremist groups rarely engage with or consult young people in communities, or indeed the wider community. Many respondents recognised that an effective strategy in countering the threat of extremist groups lies in a collaborative approach engaging all stakeholders, including government authorities, law enforcement agencies, civil society, the media, families and the general public at large. It is not a matter of simply informing the wider public through awareness-raising programmes, but directly engaging them in efforts to counter threats to safety and security. Significant dividends are likely to be found through law enforcement agencies consulting and working with the youth sector in addressing ways in which to discourage young people from engaging in criminal activities or joining extremist groups, and supporting them in their reintegration in to civil society should they leave such groups. Seemingly low rates of reporting crimes to the police suggest that confidence-building measures may be required to augment such collaborative initiatives.

Recommendations

Based upon the research conducted for this report, a number of key recommendations are made, not least among these is the need to conduct further research in this area to corroborate some of the findings, develop some of the analyses and provide more detailed recommendations. The research sample size for this report was considerably small. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the findings and recommendations may prove useful and be built upon in the near future in order to improve the security and quality of lives of the people in North Bengal and further afield.

- Engage key stakeholders in responding to safety and security concerns as well as threats of violent extremism, including young women and men, wider civil society, the media, families and communities, the security sector and government administrations.

- Promote community security initiatives as a preventive mechanism to counter the threat of insecurity including violent extremism and ensure that vulnerable groups (such as women, children and youth) are not exploited by criminals or extremist groups who take advantage of their vulnerability, lack of awareness, poverty or unemployment.

- Develop and implement an education reform programme that addresses the weaknesses of both the *madrassa* and mainstream education systems and particularly ensures students are equipped with the skills and knowledge that will give them the best chance of securing gainful employment.

- Develop and implement employment generation and poverty reduction programmes, particularly for young people.

- Create ways in which the frustration of young people can be legitimately vented and leisure time can be productively spent by means of support networks, recreational clubs and activities. Other platforms could also be developed for more frequent and healthier interactions among the youths and also with others in the society.

- Develop and implement awareness-raising initiatives, with the objective of familiarising communities with the threats associated with violent extremism and familiarising young people with concepts such as social responsibility. Such awareness programmes should aim to discourage people from engaging in crime/violence or joining extremist groups, and identify where support can be found if required. The mass media should be utilised in this regard, alongside cultural programmes with local actors and artists, for instance.

- In order to improve safety and security in North Bengal, the efforts of law enforcement agencies in dealing with public security concerns, including the threat of violent extremism and monitoring and preventing the flow of SALW within and into Bangladesh, require reinforcement by the Government. Sensitisation programmes, such as participatory workshops and seminars, should be organised for members of law enforcement agencies, local government authorities and young people to build trust and confidence as well as tackle issues of safety and security and better understand each other's perspectives.

- Efforts to counter safety and security concerns in North Bengal should be placed firmly in the context of national and regional strategies to improve the law and order situation as well as strategies to tackle poverty and socio-economic backwardness. Efforts should be made to promote comprehensive and holistic approaches to address these concerns, secure national and regional support for efforts in North Bengal and, through so doing, increase the likely success of such efforts.

ANNEX: Survey methodology

The research conducted for this report was undertaken in Bangladesh during the period between November 2010 and April 2011. The research methodologies employed for this study were:

- A perception survey
- Focus group discussions
- A media survey
- Key informant interviews
- Desk review.

The youth perception survey

Using a random (probability) sampling technique a series of questions were asked to 660 young men and women aged between 18 and 35 years living in 16 *thanas* or *upazilas* (sub-districts) in 11 districts (Pabna, Natore, Rajshahi, Nawabganj, Bogra, Naogaon, Joypurhat, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Nilphamari and Panchagarh) in North Bengal, with an equal distribution of participants in each district (60 persons). Sites were chosen as being potentially the most vulnerable to threats associated with crime, incidences of violence and extremist groups, having been identified in desk research and media stories. The survey was conducted between 23 and 25 December 2010.

The survey was designed to provide a representative analysis of youth perceptions of safety and security in North Bengal (see table below), given that views of the youth are important since they are the future leaders who will determine the future course of Bangladesh's ideological and socio-political development. Of the survey respondents, 69 percent were male and 31 percent were female. Most respondents (69 percent) were between 18 and 25 years of age, with the average age being 24 years. Most respondents (58.4 percent) were students and very few had no formal education or only some *madrassa* education (8 percent). Data was disaggregated according to gender, age, district of residence, education and occupation.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the data collected from the survey.

Distribution of the sample for the quantitative survey

Division	Districts	Upazila/ thana
Rangpur	Panchagarh	Tetulia
	Dinajpur	Parbatipur, Nawabganj
	Nilphamari	Syedpur
	Rangpur	Rangpur Sadar, Pirgachha
Rajshahi	Bogra	Sherpur
	Joypurhat	Joypurhat Sadar
	Naogaon	Atrai, Raninagar
	Rajshahi	Bagmara, Godagari, Rajshahi Sadar
	Nawabganj	Shibganj
	Natore	Natore Sadar
	Pabna	Ishwardi

Focus group discussions

Three FGDs were conducted in the Rajshahi, Naogaon and Dinajpur Districts of North Bengal. The locations were chosen as they were seen to be associated with high levels of insecurity and extremist activity. Participants were chosen to represent a broad range of individuals, including community leaders, politicians, university and *madrassa* students, teachers, human rights activists, lawyers, journalists and security

service providers. While a gender balance was sought, only one in four participants were female. Considerable care was taken in hiring local FGD co-ordinators and choosing venues which would be the most conducive for open discussion on sensitive matters.

Key informant interviews

Sixteen KIIs were conducted in Dhaka with a broad range of policy decision makers from the Government of Bangladesh, representatives of the security sector (predominantly law enforcement and intelligence) and civil society members (including journalists and lawyers).

The media survey

The analysis drew upon reports containing particular key words from a selection of four newspapers (Bangla: *Prothom Alo; Shamokal*; English: *The Daily Star; New Age*), which are widely recognised as being reliable sources of accurate information. The focus of the reports was on the prevalence of insecurity, presence and activities of extremist groups and the efforts of law enforcement agencies and the Government to counter the threat of insecurity and extremist groups.

Desk review

A variety of secondary sources were analysed on the subject of safety and security in North Bengal.

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