

Table of Contents

- ***Court impedes effort to rescue kidnapped girl in Bangladesh***
 - ***Motive sought for slaying of Church worker in Bangladesh***
 - ***Muslims in Bangladesh seize land used by church***
 - ***Police in Bangladesh torture pastor, two others***
 - ***Muslim villagers beat Evangelists in southeastern Bangladesh***
 - ***Buddhist cremation rite forced on Christians in Bangladesh***
 - ***Muslim protests stall church construction in Bangladesh***
 - ***Muslim pilgrims in Bangladesh beat Bible student***
 - ***Bangladeshi Muslims drive Christian grandparents from home***
-

Court impedes effort to rescue kidnapped girl in Bangladesh

Muslim men abduct Christian eighth-grader, force her to convert and marry

By Aenon Shalom

Compass Direct (03.11.2009) / HRWF (05.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A bail order in Bangladesh has impeded police from rescuing a young Christian girl who was abducted and forced to convert to Islam and marry one of her kidnappers, according to police.

Four Muslim men abducted eighth-grade student Silvia Merry Sarker on July 30 as she made her way home from school in west Sujankathi village, under Agoiljhara police jurisdiction, in Barisal district in southern Bangladesh, according to her father, Julian Sarker.

Sarker filed a case under the Women and Children Repression Act against Al-Amin Faria, 24, Shamim Faria, 22, Sahadat Faria, 20, and Sattar Faria, 50.

"My daughter was abducted by Faria with the help of his cousins and other relatives," said Sarker.

Sarker filed a First Information Report (FIR) charging that the men abducted his daughter initially to "indulge Al-Amin Faria's evil desire." Later she was forced to convert to Islam and marry Al-Amin Faria, which Sarker said was part of an attempt to take over his land and property.

Local police inspector Ashok Kumar Nandi told Compass that police were continuing efforts to arrest the kidnappers but had yet to find them, as the unusually early bail order had blocked their efforts.

"There are four names as prime suspects in the case," Nandi said. "We arrested three of them, but the court released them on bail. If the court had given them to us on remand, we might have found the girl, or at least we would get much information to rescue the girl."

Generally suspects in cases under the Women and Children Repression Act are not granted bail so early for the sake of investigations, Nandi said.

"We do not know why they were released on bail," he said. "Those released persons are moving freely in the village. We cannot arrest them again without an order."

Attorney Rabindra Ghosh, president of Bangladesh Minority Watch and an activist for Dutch human rights organization Global Human Rights Defense, told Compass that the granting of bail to the suspects also poses threats to the victim's family.

"They are threatening the victim's family to withdraw the case," said Ghosh. "Release of the abductors on bail so early is a travesty - the abductors got impunity due to the early bail order. For the sake of the girl's rescue, the court could have sent the arrestees to police on remand to find more information about their hideout."

Gnosh concurred that an accused person under the Women and Children Repression Act case does not get bail so early without first getting necessary information from them.

False document

A few days after the kidnapping, Sarker said, the abductors provided Nimchandra Bepari, a Hindu neighbor, an affidavit claiming that Sarker's daughter was 19 years old. Bepari gave the affidavit to the local police inspector. The kidnappers also contacted sub-district chairman Mortuza Khan.

"My daughter is 13 years old, but the abductors made an affidavit of her age showing 19 years old," Sarker said.

The headmaster of Agoiljhara Shrimoti Matrimangal Girls High School, where the girl is a student, issued a certificate denoting that Silvia Merry Sarker is even younger than 13 - born on Dec. 24, 1997, which would mean she is not yet 12 years old.

The fabricated affidavit provided by the kidnappers states that she accepted Islam and has married, said Sarker.

"I am shocked how a minor girl is shown as an adult in the affidavit," Ghosh said. "It is illegal, and there should be proper action against this kind of illegal activity."

Al-Amin Faria had tried to get the girl's two older sisters to marry him, but their early marriages saved them from falling prey to him, Sarker said.

"I married off my two elder daughters at an early age immediately after finishing their schooling," said Sarker.

Before they married, Sarker said he felt helpless to keep Faria and his family from accosting and harassing his other daughters.

"I could not take any legal action against them since we are the only Christian family here," he said. "I tolerated everything. I did not inform it to police or they would get infuriated."

When Faria "targeted" his second daughter for marriage, Sarker informed the headmaster of the school and its managing committee, and they warned the Muslim not to disturb the family, Sarker said. Nevertheless, he said, he felt he couldn't send his older daughters to school because he feared Faria would harm them.

"The relation of us with those Muslim neighbors is 'predator-and-prey,'" he said. "I saved my other family members from his lechery, but I could not save my youngest daughter."

Sarker said he felt alone and helpless as a Christian minority but that he doesn't understand how the entire justice system also can be so helpless.

"Why and how can the court, law enforcement agencies, police, administration, society and the country be helpless against him? Why can't they rescue my daughter?" he said.

Dilip Gabriel Bepari, an activist for Bangladesh Minority Watch, told Compass that the group had informed national and international officials in seeking help to find the girl.

"We informed it to various ministers, political leaders and police high officials," Bepari said. "We also informed it to the Vatican ambassador in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, the girl is still missing."

Archbishop Paulinus Costa of Bangladesh said the Catholic Church's impassioned plea to the government is to rescue her as soon as possible and bring the kidnappers to justice.

"It is unfortunate that the girl is not rescued yet in three months," Costa said. "There must be negligence and indifference to the Christians from the government, otherwise the girl would be rescued."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) this year removed Bangladesh from its "Watch List" of countries requiring close monitoring of religious freedom violations, but it urged the new Awami League administration to strengthen protections for all Bangladeshis.

USCIRF also indicates that it hopes the government of Bangladesh will investigate and prosecute perpetrators of violent acts against members of minority religious communities.

Motive sought for slaying of Church worker in Bangladesh

Police, wife doubt student attackers' story of cell phone theft

By Aenon Shalom

Compass Direct (24.09.2009) / HRWF (29.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Authorities are investigating possible motives for the vicious killing of a church worker by students at Dhaka University.

A management student at the university and his friends are accused of torturing and killing Swapan Mondol, 35, on Sept. 12 in Suhrawardy Park, adjacent to the university. Mondol, a convert from Hinduism, was supervisor of youth mission for Free Christian Church of Bangladesh (FCCB).

The primary suspect's friends claim they came to his aid after Mondol stole his cell phone, a scenario that Mondol's wife and police said they doubt. His wife, Lucky Mondol, told Compass that she does not know why they killed her husband.

"He was an evangelist and earned good amount of money from his job, so he could not snatch a mobile phone in the park," she said.

She said that when she rushed to Dhaka Medical Hospital after learning of the attack, she found her husband's body lying stiff on the floor with two holes in his head. His body was smeared with congealed blood. He had been wearing a gold ring and a neck chain of gold, but those items and his cell phone were missing, she said.

Police suspect Mohammed Rajon and his student friends of the killing and have confirmed reports of other cases of violence by student groups who cite cell phone theft as a pretext for attacking innocent people.

Local police inspector Rezaul Karim told Compass the killing was cloaked in mystery.

"Some students of Dhaka University killed Mondol on a charge of snatching a mobile phone," Karim said. "The students said they caught him red-handed, so why didn't they just hand him over to us? If he had snatched anything from them, we would have recovered it from him."

Police will file a murder case, Karim said.

"What a killing frenzy it was," he said. "Nobody has the right to kill anyone, whoever he is."

Karim denied Bangladeshi newspaper reports claiming that he said Mondol and three accomplices tried to steal a cell phone from Rajon.

Calumnies

Almost all Bangladeshi media portrayed Mondol, who studied theology at the Christian Development Center in Dhaka and completed graduate work in theology in Bangalore, India, as a thief who worked among park prostitutes.

"I am so shocked by the media, which published vicious calumnies about him," she said. "The media reports added fuel to the flames and indirectly supported the lynch mob."

Some newspapers quoted her even though she never spoke to their reporters, she said.

"One top Bengali newspaper reported that my husband used to go everyday in the park, and that I told it to them," she said. "It is a thumping lie. Around 15 to 20 days a month my husband used to officially visit various districts in the country for church work. How an innocent man died with scandal!"

FCCB Chairman Albert P. Mridha told Compass that Mondol, father of a 10-year-old child, was a loyal and sober church worker who worked for 14 years in nationwide ministry.

"We do not have any program from our church to work among the floating [park] sex workers," Mridha said.

A week before his death, Mondol returned from a three-week trip to southern Bangladesh to oversee church activities, Mridha said. He had planned to preach at a revival meeting in northern Bangladesh.

"Most of the days of the month he used to spend on tour for church work," Mridha said. "Sometimes he used to go to the Dhaka University area to see the cultural programs."

Bangladeshi media also mistakenly identified Mondol as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) worker, to which Mridha also objected, saying a church employee is not an NGO worker.

"He was an honest and sincere worker in his duty," said Mridha. "If 14 years of past experience is anything to go by, undoubtedly I can say that he was not engaged in theft. There was different kind of motive to kill him which we do not know. But killing him on suspicion of snatching was a pretext."

Muslims in Bangladesh seize land used by church

Bengali-speaking settlers file case against Christians; one threatens, 'I will finish your life.'

By Aenon Shalom

Compass Direct (01.09.2009) / HRWF (02.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Bengali-speaking, Muslim settlers have seized five acres of abandoned government property used by a church and falsely charged Christians with damaging the land in southeastern Bangladesh's Khagrachari hill district, Christian leaders said.

Kiron Joti Chakma, field director of Grace Baptist Church in Khagrachari district, told Compass that the settlers had taken over the church building and the five acres of land in Reservechara village in June and filed a case on Aug. 4 against five tribal Christians. The Bengali-speaking Muslims had come from other areas of Bangladesh in a government resettlement program that began in 1980.

"In the case, the settlers mentioned that the Christians had cut the trees and damaged the crops on their land and that they should pay 250,000 taka [US\$3,690] as compensation," said Chakma. "We cultivated pineapple in the land around the church. But the settlers damaged all of our pineapple trees and built two houses there."

The government has allowed the Christians to use the land. Tribal leaders said that land-grabbing in the area hill tracts, undulating landscape under Dighinala police jurisdiction 300 kilometers (186 miles) southeast of the Dhaka, began again during the army-backed interim government of 2007-2008.

"It is still continuing, and our demands to stop land-grabbing do not rate very high with the administration and law enforcement agencies," said one of the accused, 32-year-old Mintu Chakma.

When he went to the police station regarding the false case filed against the Christians, he said, the leader of the Bengali settlers was there and threatened him in front of officers, telling him, "I can devour dozens of people like you - I will finish your life."

Church leaders have informed a nearby army camp of the seizure. Military officers said they would take action, but they have done nothing so far, Christians said.

"Our leaders informed the army zone commander, and he assured us they would take necessary action, but nothing has happened so far against those land grabbers and arsonists," said 25-year-old Liton Chakma (Chakma is the name of the tribe), one of the Christians accused in the Grace Baptist case.

The Muslim settlers had burned a Seventh-day Adventist Church building in 2008 in Boachara village, close to the Grace Baptist Christians' village, in an effort to frighten tribal people away from becoming Christian, said Liton Chakma. He told Compass that Bengali settlers had also hindered their attempt to construct the church building in August in 2007.

"Many new believers saw nothing had happened to the arsonists, and many of them reverted to their previous Buddhism," he said. "The army and local administration allowed them to run wild. They always threaten to beat us and file cases against us."

Mintu Chakma said that Muslim settlers seized a garden next to his house in 2007.

"They not only destroyed my pineapple garden, but they built a mosque there," he said.

Land Ownership

Local police inspector Suvas Pal told Compass that neither tribal people nor Bengali settlers were the owners of that land. It is government-owned, abandoned land, he said.

"The Bengali settlers claim that the land was assigned to lease to them, but we did not find any copy of lease in the deputy commissioner's office," said Pal. "On the other hand, the tribal people could not show any papers of their possession of the land."

Investigating Officer Omar Faruque told Compass that the Muslim settlers had built two houses there, though they did not live there or nearby.

"I told the Bengali settlers that if they [tribal Christians] worship in the church there, then do not disturb them," said Faruque.

Dipankar Dewan, headman of the tribal community, told Compass that the tribal Christians have an historical claim to the land.

"The land belonged to the forefathers of tribal Christians, so they can lay claim to the property by inheritance," said Dewan.

During conflict between tribal people and Bengali people in the hill tracts, the tribal people left the country and took shelter in neighboring India, leaving much of their land abandoned. Bengali settlers took over some of the land, while the government leased other tracts to Bengali settlers, Dewan said.

"Many lands of the tribal people were grabbed in the hill tracts in the two years of state-of-emergency period of the previous army-backed, interim government," he said. "Those Bengali settlers tried to grab the land during the tenure of the army-backed, interim government."

Members of the Shanti Bahini, tribal guerrillas who fought for autonomy in the hill tracts, ended a 25-years revolt in the Chittagong Hill Tracts area in 1997 under a peace treaty in which the government was to withdraw troops and restore land acquired by settlers to local tribesmen.

Some 2,000 Shanti Bahini guerrillas surrendered their weapons following the 1997 treaty. But the tribal people say many aspects of the treaty remain unfulfilled, including restoration of rights and assigning jobs to them.

The guerrillas had fought for autonomy in the hill and forest region bordering India and Burma (Myanmar) in a campaign that left nearly 8,500 troops, rebels and civilians killed.

Recently the Awami League government ordered one army brigade of nearly 2,500 troops to pull out from the hill tract, and the withdrawal that began early last month is expected to be completed soon. Four brigades of army are still deployed in the hill tracts comprising three districts – Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban.

Police in Bangladesh torture pastor, two others

Local Muslim leaders prompt officers to arrest, abuse evangelistic team

By Aenon Shalom

Compass Direct (04.08.2009) / HRWF (05.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - At the urging of local Muslim leaders, police in western Bangladesh have tortured a pastor and two other Christians for legally proclaiming Christ.

Habibur Rahman, 45, pastor of Boalia Spiritual Church (Boalia Ruhani Jamat) in Boalia in Cuadanga district, 220 kilometers (136 miles) west of Dhaka, said he was about to meet with 11 others for a monthly meeting on evangelism at 8 p.m. on June 8 when local police stormed in and seized him and Zahid Hassan, 25, and a 40-year-old Christian identified only as Fazlur.

The first question the police commander asked him, Rahman said, was, "Why did you become Christian?"

"Using a lot of filthy words, he charged me that I was teaching the Bible and converting people to Christianity in this area," the pastor told Compass.

In May, a police patrol chief had threatened to seize him at a church meeting but was misinformed about the time it would take place, Rahman said.

The commander who seized him and the two others was a sub-inspector with the name Khaleque on his badge, Rahman said. Police dragged them to a nearby parked vehicle and transported them to Shamvunagar police camp.

"Police told us, 'We will teach you in the camp how to forget your Christ,' while dragging us to the vehicle," said Rahman.

Police blindfolded them after reaching the camp and took them to three separate rooms.

"I heard blood-curdling scream from other rooms," Rahman said. "I was sitting on the floor blindfolded. I could not understand what was happening around me. Later several police came to me and one of them kicked me on the back of my head, and my head ricocheted off the wall. They also kicked my waist."

Ordering him to say how many people he had converted to Christianity in the Muslim-majority nation, the commander said he would kick him a like number of times. The official told him to call out to Jesus, saying he wanted to see how Jesus would save him, Rahman said.

"While beating us, police told us there will be no Christian in this area," the pastor said. "Police hurt our hands, lips, thighs and faces with burning cigarettes. They beat me in the joints of my limbs with a wooden club. They beat us for one hour, and I became senseless at some point."

Police officers told Rahman to admit that whatever he had done in his life was wrong, he said. When they sent them to Boalia police station early the next morning, dozens of Christians arrived to try to obtain their release.

Police, however, were reluctant to release the detained Christians.

"Some Christian villagers then said, 'We are also criminal because we believe in Christ like Habibur Rahman and the other two Christians,'" Rahman said. "They told police, 'If you do not release them, then arrest us and put us in jail.'"

Police did not release the three Christians until 9:30 that night.

The next day, June 10, thousands of Muslim villagers demonstrated in front of a local government office called the Zamzami Union Council chanting, "We want a Christian-free society," and "We will not allow any Christians in Cuadanga."

The frenzied mob called for Rahman to appear at the local government office, and a sub-district administrative chief called in 10 Christians and 10 Muslims including imams to try to resolve the matter. In that meeting, the administrative official told everyone to practice their religion freely without disturbing others.

"The administrative chief also said nobody should interfere in other religions, but even now we cannot attend our churches for worship," Rahman said. "Local people said, 'You will come in the church alive but return home dead.'"

Police Denial

Police denied carrying out any torture, saying they arrested the Christians for interrogation because villagers had informed officers that some underground Maoist terrorists had gathered in the house.

Jotish Biswas, executive director of Way of Life Trust, said the marks of torture were unmistakable.

"There were streaks of blood on their legs, hands and faces," said Biswas, who interceded with police on behalf of the arrested Christians. "I have seen marks of cigarette burns on their bodies. They were beaten so severely that they could not walk properly."

Biswas said he had learned that a local official and some Muslim clerics had prompted police to torture the Christians because they objected to their evangelistic activity.

"Police violated the rights of minorities enshrined in the Bangladeshi constitution," Biswas said. "It was a gross violation of human rights."

Chanchal Mehmud Kashem, a Christian journalist who visited the area, told Compass that the area is lacking in freedom of religion.

"Torture by police suggests that those Christians are not citizens of Bangladesh," Kashem said. "It suggests they are illegal, alien and that evangelism is a crime."

Kashem added that the notion that "underground terrorists" had gathered in a house was a pretext for harassing the Christians. "Rahman has been working as an evangelist in this area for one and half years," he said.

There are 176 Christians in the area where Rahman works as an evangelist and pastor, he said.

"The local government council chairman told me two times not to come in this area," Rahman said. "He said, 'There is no Christian in this area, so why do you come here to make Christians?'"

Local Muslim villagers have since refused to give work to area Christians, most of whom are day laborers dependent on obtaining daily jobs to survive.

Muslim villagers beat Evangelists in southeastern Bangladesh

Nearly four months later, Christian worker still suffering nerve damage

By Aenon Shalom

Compass Direct (01.06.2009) / HRWF (02.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Nearly four months after Muslim villagers in this southeastern Bangladesh sub-district furiously beat two evangelists for showing the "Jesus Film," one of the Christians is still receiving treatment for nerve damage to his hip.

Christian Life Bangladesh (CLB) worker Edward Biswas, 32, was admitted to Alabakth Physiotherapy Centre on May 5. Dr. Mohammad Saifuddin Julfikar told Compass that injuries Biswas sustained from the Feb. 8 attack in Feni district, some 150 kilometers (93 miles) southeast of Dhaka, had led to neurological complications in his hip.

"His hip joint was displaced, and one bone in the hip was fractured," Julfikar said.

Biswas told Compass that he and 21-year-old Dolonmoy Tripura first showed the film on Feb. 7 in a home in Chandpur village, where they also taught the more than 200 poor and mostly illiterate viewers about the dangers of arsenic in water, mother-and-child health care and AIDS prevention. United Nations Children's Fund reports say more than 30 million people are exposed to high levels of arsenic in water in Bangladesh and India.

Azad Mia of the same village requested they show the film at his house the following day. They went to his home the evening of Feb. 8, but because one of Mia's family members was ill they were unable to screen the film. As they returned home, Biswas said, some villagers told them to show the film at their home; the two evangelists suspected a trap.

"At first they tried to sweet-talk us into going to their house," Biswas said. "On our refusal to show the film, they tried to force us to go. I smelled a rat and again refused to go. Later they forcefully took us deep inside the village."

About 20 people gathered and began beating them, he said.

"Some of the elders of the village told them to release us, but they were adamant to see the movie," Biswas said. "They took us to a schoolyard, where we showed the 'Jesus Film' under tremendous compulsion. After showing 20 minutes of the first reel of the film, Muslim villagers again started beating us as we were lying on the ground. They punched and kicked us."

While 15 to 20 Muslims struck them, approximately 200 others present for the screening looked on, he said. The villagers also beat a Muslim who had transported the CLB workers about the village on a three-wheel rickshaw for the showing of the film.

The assailants also destroyed the film projector, generator, microphone and the four reels of the film, Biswas said.

"Several days after the beating, I came to know from some villagers that a family had become Christian around 10 years ago in the neighboring village," Biswas said. "All the villagers were angry, and they evicted that family from the village."

The attack was pre-planned, with the showing of the film seen as a legitimate pretext for beating them, he said. They also threatened Daud Mia, a Muslim villager who had allowed them to show the film in his house the previous day, said Biswas.

CLB Area Supervisor Gabriel Das took Biswas and Tripura to a local doctor for treatment. CLB Chairman Sunil Adhikary expressed concern about freedom of religion and the rights of minorities provided in the country's constitution.

"The beating was a flagrant violation of our rights," said Adhikary. "They showed the film, but they did not force anyone to be converted. We forgave the attackers and showed them the love of our God."

Since 2003 at least three CLB workers in Bangladesh have been killed – likely by Islamic extremists, say police and local officials – and several hundred have been injured.

In April Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed spoke about freedom of religion, democratic governance and equal opportunity in Bangladesh with Gerard Valin, vice-admiral of the French Navy and commander of the French Joint Forces in the Indian Ocean, who was visiting the country. Hasina told the commander that Bangladesh would protect religious freedom for all faith groups, as well as ensure freedom of expression for all minorities.

Buddhist cremation rite forced on Christians in Bangladesh

Villagers demand money, compel mourners to chant Buddhist mantras

By Aenon Shalom

Compass Direct (21.05.2009) / HRWF (28.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Buddhist villagers in southeastern Bangladesh forced Christians to participate in a Buddhist cremation rite for a deceased family member last weekend and demanded money for a post-funeral ceremony.

Uttam Lal Chakma, 55, died last Friday (May 15) after a long illness in Dighinala sub-district of Khagrachari hill district, some 400 kilometers (250 miles) southeast of Dhaka. A member of Mynasukhnachari Baptist Church in the Babuchara neighborhood, Chakma had converted from Buddhism to Christianity two years ago.

Pastor Vubon Chakma and Christian villagers sought to give him a Christian burial the next day, but a hostile group of local Buddhists forcibly stopped them from doing so, according to a local Christian source.

The source told Compass that a member of the Buddhist group told family members, "He was born as a Buddhist, and he will be buried as a Buddhist."

Local Buddhists prohibited the Christian burial at the behest of the village committee chairman, the source said.

"Forcefully they cremated him by wood log and forced other Christians who were present there to utter Buddha mantras," the source said.

Christian villagers subsequently requested that they be allowed to bury the charred bones. They dug a grave and were praying and reading Bible verses when Buddhist villagers, some of them drunk, arrived and brought the ceremony to a halt.

"They said to the Christians, 'You cannot read the Bible here,'" the church source said, requesting that the names of the Buddhist leaders be withheld for security reasons.

One of the senior pastors of the Babuchara Baptist church, 60-year-old Pitambar Chakma, tried to reason with the enraged Buddhists, but they confined him and Vubon Chakma for the night.

The source added that they demanded 12,000 taka (\$US177) to hold a post-funeral ceremony today, to which they planned to invite more than 250 Buddhists, including their local monk.

"They threatened that if we do not give it before May 21, we have to give them 24,000 taka, twice as much as they wanted," the source said. "They also threatened if 12,000 taka is not given to them, pastor Vubon Chakma and his father will be evicted from the society. This is a sign of unremitting hostility toward Christians by Buddhists."

At press time the amount had not been given, but the area Buddhists had taken no action, the source said.

The village Buddhists also protested when Christians constructed a church building eight months ago, he said.

"Always they force all the people here to become Buddhist and males to shave their heads," he said.

Besides threats of expulsion, local Buddhists have also disparaged Christian converts in foul language, and there have been instances of torture, the source said, adding that there are 22 Christians in the area.

"We have no one to complain to about them," the church source said. "If we protest against them, it is dangerous because they have links with an underground armed group. If we inform the administration or law enforcement agencies, they do not help us because of our conversion."

The local Buddhists have ties with United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) militants who oppose a 1997 peace accord between the government and the tribal people. The hill tract areas had suffered unrest for decades, and hostilities continue as a leading proponent of the peace accord urged the government to ban UPDF for alleged terrorist activities, according to today's The Daily Prothom Alo.

Muslim protests stall church construction in Bangladesh

Pastor says an Awami League Party student leader threatened him

By Aenon Shalom

Compass Direct (04.04.2009) / HRWF (05.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Bangladeshi authorities called a five-month halt to construction of a church in northern Bangladesh, for fear of huge conversions. Authorities have said they will approve renewed construction soon.

Forkan Al Mashi, 55, a pastor of Calvary Ishai Fellowship, started building a church in early November 2008 in Palashbari Mondol Para in Kurigram district, 350 kilometers (218 miles) north of the capital city, Dhaka.

Mashi told Compass that, at the urging of local Jamaat-e-Islami leaders, more than 100 Muslims gathered in a mosque on Nov. 7 to protest the church construction.

The villagers wanted to demolish the building, in which four pillars and the floor were completed. Mashi informed police when he heard of these plans.

"I informed police and instantly two platoons of police, around 25 in number, were deployed near the under-construction church building," Mashi said. "Some of the police also went to the mosque to persuade the Muslims not to demolish the pillars and the floor of the under-construction church building."

A police official told Compass that Muslims were concerned about huge conversions from Islam to Christianity if the church was built.

"The construction work of the church has been stopped by the protest of the local Muslims. Local people said, 'Why should there be a church in the predominantly Muslim area?'" the official said. "This church is the first church in this area. Local people protested because they thought there would be huge conversion in this area from Islam to Christianity, and the church would be the center."

A district official told Compass that construction would resume soon.

"Christians in this country have the right to practice their religion as well as the right to build churches," the official said. "I think the permission of constructing the church will be given soon from the city council. If anybody actively obstructs the construction of the church, we will protect it."

Administrative maneuvering

After Muslims protested construction of the church, the mayor halted construction. Generally city dwellers need building plans and permission from the city council to build a house.

"The local Muslims fired all the cylinders of the society to stop building a church in this vicinity. They want me not to work for the expansion of the Kingdom of God here. They persuaded the city council authority to stop [construction of] the church," Mashi said. "The mayor of the city council told me that I did not have any building plan and permission from them to build a house here, so I should stop the construction work."

One city council commissioner told Mashi that he did not need permission to construct his small, one-room church building.

Mashi wrote a letter to the district administrative chief to ask permission to resume church construction.

"A few days ago, the mayor assured me that he would give the plan and permission of the building and I can resume its construction," Mashi said.

Mashi said the mayor also told him there was pressure from the government to resume construction soon.

Pastor Mashi threatened

A few days before the construction of the church, a local student leader of the ruling Awami League Party warned Mashi not to build the church.

"If you want to be 'alive and live here,' do not build any church in this neighborhood," Mashi said in quoting the leader.

Mashi, who grew up Muslim, became a Christian in 1984. There are 60 registered members of his church.

"We have been worshiping Christ for 12 years in our house covertly, sometimes on the roof," he said.

The district administrative chief has previously provided police protection to the church for its Christmas and Easter services, Mashi said.

Bangladesh's constitution supports religious freedom.

Muslim pilgrims in Bangladesh beat Bible student

Throng from annual event threatens to kill 20-year-old as he distributes Christian literature

By Aenon Shalom

Compass Direct (05.02.2009) / HRWF (06.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Pilgrims to a massive Islamic conference near this capital city on Sunday (Feb. 1) beat and threatened to kill a Bible school student as he distributed Christian literature.

Rajen Murmo, 20, a student at Believers' Church Bible College, was distributing the 32-page books among Muslims near the school along with 25 other students in Uttara town in northern Dhaka, just a few kilometers from the banks of a river in Tongi where the government claimed that 4 million Muslim pilgrims had gathered. They had massed for the annual, three-day World Muslim Congregation (Bishwa Ijtema).

Murmo told Compass that a man with a ragged beard in a loose white garment and white trousers, along with some other men, approached the students and told them Muslims did not abide by the Bible because the Quran had superseded it, rendering it outdated.

"Suddenly some of his outrageous entourage grasped me and asked where I got the books and who gave me the books. They wanted to know the address of my religious leaders and mission, but I did not give them the address," said Murmo. "If I had given them the address of the Bible college, they would have destroyed it. My blank denial to give information to them made them enraged, and they started beating me. They told me if I do not give the address of the religious leaders and mission, they would kill me."

A throng of more than 50 raucous Muslims kicked, slapped and punched him, he said, leaving him with a split lip. Clutching his collar and tearing his shirt, they insisted that he give them the school's address and that of his mission and Christian leaders; as he continued to refuse, their anger further flared, he said. A patrolling vehicle from the elite force Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) consisting of army, navy, air force and police appeared and rescued him, Murmo said.

Later the mob persuaded the elite force to send him to a nearby police station, he said, and principal Amos Deory of the Bible college went to release him. Deory told Murmo that police officers expressed concern that if the RAB agents had not arrived in time, the angry pilgrims would have killed him.

The Rev. Kiron Roaza of Believers' Church told Compass that the Bible students were distributing the tracts as part of their regular evangelistic tasks. He said the beating was unwarranted as Bangladesh's constitution provides for the right to propagate one's faith.

Bangladeshi Muslims equate the annual World Muslim Congregation or Bishwa Ijtema with the hajj, the pilgrimage to Islam's birthplace in Mecca, Saudi Arabia that last year was held Dec. 6-10. The Bangladeshi gathering just north of Dhaka, at which Muslims pray and listen to Islamic scholars from around the world, was first held in the 1960s.

The event was launched by Tabligh Jamaat, a missionary and revival group that shuns politics and urges Muslims to follow Islam in their everyday lives. Its stated purpose is to revive the tenets of Islam and promote peace and harmony. More than 10,000 foreigners from 108 countries attended the event, according to media reports, but most of the worshippers were rural Bangladeshis. Bangladesh is the world's third-largest Muslim-majority nation, with Muslims making up nearly 90 percent of its population of 150 million.

The Quran calls on all Muslims to make the pilgrimage to Mecca if they have the means. The date changes from year to year based on the Islamic lunar calendar. The official SPA news agency of Saudi Arabia reported the total number of pilgrims to Mecca at nearly 2.4 million, about 1.73 million from abroad and 679,000 from within the kingdom, mostly foreign residents.

Bangladeshi Muslims drive Christian grandparents from home

Couple's grown sons expel them after neighbors threaten to ostracize grandchildren

By Aeon Shalom

Compass Direct (14.01.2009) / HRWF (15.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Muslims in a village in western Bangladesh have forced two brothers to expel their parents from their home for converting to Christianity.

Ishmael Sheikh, 70, and his wife Rahima Khatun, 55, were baptized on Nov. 9. By the end of the month, Sheikh told Compass, Muslim neighbors in Kathuly village, near Gangni town in Meherpur district, had compelled their two sons to expel them from their house. Meherpur district is 270 kilometers (168 miles) west of Dhaka.

The ailing Sheikh told Compass that his two sons had come under tremendous pressure from neighbors in the village, which was entirely Muslim before the couple received Christ. The neighbors threatened that the children of Sheikh's sons would not be allowed to marry anyone from the village if the brothers allowed their parents to remain in the home.

"My sons are afraid that if we go back to home, their sons and daughters will not be married off in the Muslim society," Sheikh said. "We are the first converted Christians in this village. Neighbors told my sons, 'Why should your parents live in this village? They do not have right to live here because they are no longer Muslims.'"

The couple went to a shelter used by itinerant minstrels who sing traditional Bengali songs a half kilometer away from their home.

"I got salvation in Jesus," Sheikh said. "In this shelter without food, I am ready to flirt with death by debilitating illness or by attack by Muslim neighbors, but never will I go back to Islam."

The couple's pastor, Jhontu Biswas, has met with their sons several times, most recently on Thursday (Jan. 8), to request that they take their parents back into their home. The sons would like to take them back but cannot because of the pressure from the Muslims, he said.

"Villagers put pressure on Sheikh's sons that if they take back their newly converted Christian parents in home, their daughters will not be married off in the society," said Biswas. "His younger son is trying to marry off his daughter who is not mature enough to get married. They are looking for a groom. He cannot take back his parents in the house until his daughter gets married."

None of Biswas' own relatives are Christians, and he said none of them are allowed to form any relationship with anyone in the Muslim society. Biswas said that Sheikh is ill and can do nothing but beg for his survival.

"He took shelter in the shelter, and believers in this area give him food," said Biswas. "How long they will stay here is quite uncertain. Local believers are also very poor, and most of them are day laborers who live on the bread line. So how long will they provide food to him? Both of them are becoming ill day by day for lack of food."

Framed as terrorist

In Shoilbari village, five kilometers (three miles) away, a Christian convert from Islam told Compass that an elite Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) force comprising army, police, navy and air force detained him on Nov. 24 after finding bombs and other weapons behind his house that Muslim neighbors had placed there.

"In the evening around 15 to 16 believers along with our Pastor Biswas gathered in our house for Bible study," said Ahsan Ali, 37. "My wife and three children were also present there. My Muslim neighbors told the elite force that local terrorists had gathered in my house to plan some terrorist activities in the locality."

The RAB personnel came to Ali's house and took him to their camp, where they interrogated him with torture, he said. The following morning, RAB intelligence officers came to the village to investigate charges against Ali.

"Elite force personnel asked many people in the village the following day, and they found no criminal activities against me and later released me," said Ali.

The Assembly of God church began in the area about one and half years ago, with some 230 people coming to Christ since then.
