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Islamic extremists held for church blast in Bangladesh

Police believe militants from banned groups responsible for 2001 bombing that killed 10

Compass Direct (11.12.2010) / HRWF Int. (12.12.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net>
- Police in Bangladesh said they believe at least two Islamic extremists are responsible for a bomb blast in a Catholic church building that killed 10 young Christians and maimed dozens of others in 2001.

After a district court remanded the two extremists of the banned Harkat-ul-Jihad Al-Islami (HuJi) group, including its chief leader, to police for seven days on Dec. 7, Police Inspector Sheikh Mohammad Akhteruzzaman of the Criminal Investigation Department told Compass that they believe the militants are responsible for the long-unresolved case.

“We took Mufti Abdul Hannan and Arif Hassan Sumon on remand for interrogation for three days in the middle of November, and we found their involvement in the bombing inside the church,” Akhteruzzaman said. “We took them again on remand on Dec. 7 for seven days to verify their previous information found after interrogation. If the previous information matches this time’s interrogation, then we can be sure that they were involved in the bombing inside the church.”

A total of 14 Islamic extremists are suspected in the bombing, including three from the banned militant group Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh and 11 from the HuJi.

The blast took place as about 70 Christians attended Sunday mass on June 3, 2001 in Baniarchar village in Gopalganj district, some 100 kilometers (62 miles) south of the capital, Dhaka.

Initial police reports suggested that the blast might have been the result of a dispute between two Christian groups in the area.

“The bomb blast did not happen because of any internal feud of church members that was previously suspected,” Akhteruzzaman said. “The magnitude of the blast indicates different motives. Apparently, it seems that they found Christians as their enemy for whatever they were doing against Islam. But the exact motive will come out soon.”

The late archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church in Bangladesh, Michael Rosario, had said after the blast that there was no report of any communal tension in that area.

The initial investigation faltered under the previous Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led Islamic alliance in power from 2001 to 2006 but was revived after a landslide victory of the Awami League-led Grand Alliance government in December 2008. The chief priest of Baniarchar Catholic Church, the Rev. Jacob Gobbi, had urged the news administration to revisit the case.

The left-leaning Awami League-led government does not include Islamic fundamentalist parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami. Prior to the election, the country was ruled for two years by an army-backed, caretaker government that imposed a countrywide state of emergency.

Christians account for less than 1 percent of Bangladesh's 164.4 million people, according to Operation World, but Baniarchar has a large number of Christian residents. Muslims make up nearly 90 percent of Bangladesh's population, with Hinduism the second largest religious affiliation at 9.2 percent of the people.

The Bangladesh government banned HuJi and its activities in Bangladesh in 2005. An international Islamic militant group, HuJi's Bangladesh chapter had been involved in carrying out terrorist activities in Bangladesh for more than five years.

It was responsible for several major bomb attacks, as well as assassination attempts in 2004 on leading intellectuals and on then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed, who was ushered back into office in December 2008. An intelligence report in October 2003 had strongly recommended that HuJi be banned.

The Bangladesh chapter of HuJi was established in 1992 with an aim toward establishing Islamic rule in the country.

Buddhist extremists drive Christians from village in Bangladesh

Villagers upset with establishment of church break up prayer meetings, invade homes

By Aeon Shalom

Compass Direct (03.05.2010) / HRWF Int. (04.05.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net>
- Four Christian families in southeastern Bangladesh left their village yesterday under mounting pressure by Buddhist extremists to give up their faith in Christ.

Sources told Compass that 20 to 25 Buddhists brandishing sticks and bamboo clubs in Jamindhonpara village, 340 kilometres (211 miles) southeast of Dhaka, began patrolling streets on Friday (April 30) to keep the 11 members of the Lotiban Baptist Church from gathering for their weekly prayer meetings. On Saturday, the Buddhist extremists captured four men and beat one woman who had gathered in a home, threatening to kill them if they did not become Buddhists within 24 hours.

Yesterday, the Buddhist extremists attacked the homes of the Baptists two hours before their 1 p.m. worship service, sources said.

"Just two hours before our church service, a group of people swooped into our houses and drove all of us out so we could not attend the church service," said one church member who requested anonymity.

The Christians captured Saturday night were released after the extremists, who ripped crosses off the walls of their homes, threatened to kill them if they continued praying and worshipping in the area. After yesterday's attacks, all Christians in Jamindhonpara fled, taking shelter in another village, source said. Jamindhonpara is located in the Lotiban area, Panchari sub-district of Khagrachari district.

"When they come, they do not listen to us," said the church member. "They arbitrarily do whatever they like. The situation is indescribable – they hunt us down the same way that one hunts down a mad dog to kill it."

On Saturday the Buddhist villagers chanted anti-Christian slogans as they formed a procession that snaked through the village.

"They chanted in the demonstration, 'We will not allow any Christian to live in this area,' 'We will not allow them to build a church here,' and 'Christians cannot live in Buddhists' areas,'" said one source. "We did not inform the police or army. Informing them is very dangerous. They could even kill us if we complained about them to police and army or the local administration."

Local Buddhists were infuriated when Christians established a church in the Lotiban area in December; since then, they have been trying to stop all Christian activities. In the campaign to uproot Christianity, they have tried to expel the pastor of Lotiban Baptist Church by means of various threats, source said.

One of the Christians who fled yesterday, 65-year-old Biraj Kumar Chakma, told Compass that they would not go back to Buddhism whatever pressure might come.

"We left everything," Chakma said. "We can go through any kind of ordeal, but we will not leave Jesus, even in the face of death. I have not seen in my life a book like the Bible. To stick to it, I left my ancestral house under huge pressure of the Buddhists. They applied much force to give up our faith."

Chakma said that since his daughter became a Christian, she has not been able to live in the village.

"She is living in a hideout for her safety," he said.

The Rev. Sushil Jibon Tripura, president of Khagrachari district Baptist Fellowship Church, told Compass that the daily life of the Christian villagers has become intolerable, as they have sacrificed their livelihood for their faith.

"Buddhists are not giving them any work," Tripura said. "They are not allowed to collect drinking water from local deep tube wells. Nobody mixes with them. They are not allowed to shop in the village market. So the Buddhist villagers have ostracized them."

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) runs various projects in the area for the development of tribal people, but most the committee members are Buddhists who deprive the Christians of UNDP assistance, he said. The aid includes financial help for ginger cultivation and small cattle farming and cooperative money given through a committee selected from among the villagers.

"When they were Buddhist, they used to get all the aid provided by the UNDP," Tripura said. "But when they became Christians, they started facing problems. Recently the committee members took away eight passbooks from Christian villagers given by the UNDP for getting financial help."

Tripura said he informed the district UNDP office, and officials there said they would look into it.

The United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF), an armed group in the hill districts that is also a political party, is active in the area. Tripura said some area Buddhists have mobilized only mid-level activists of the UPDF against the Christians.

"Being an inhabitant of this area, I can say that the high-command of the UPDF is not involved here," he said.

The tribal people of the area share common ancestors and the same social/cultural milieu, he added.

"We are brothers. But the undercurrent of the hatred is religion," Tripura said. "We are trying to sit with the Buddhist leaders along with the UPDF leaders for resolving the matter in a peaceful manner."

The UPDF is one of two main tribal organizations in the hill districts, the other being the United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti, or PCJSS). The PCJSS, formed in 1973, had fought for autonomy in the region for 25 years, leaving nearly 8,500 troops, rebels and civilians killed. After signing a peace accord in 1997 with the Bangladesh government, the PCJSS laid down arms.

But the UPDF, founded in 1998 and based in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, has strong and serious reservations against the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord signed in 1997. Claiming that the agreement failed to address fundamental demands of the indigenous Jumma people, the UPDF has pledged to fight for their full autonomy.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts region comprises three districts: Bandarban, Khagrachuri and Rangamati. The region is surrounded by the Indian states of Tripura on the north and Mizoram on the east, Myanmar on the south and east.

Buddhist extremists in Bangladesh beat, take Christians captive

Pastor, two others held in pagoda in attempt to force them back to Buddhism

By Aenon Shalom

Compass Direct (23.04.2010) / HRWF Int. (26.04.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net>
- Buddhist members of an armed rebel group and their sympathizers are holding three tribal Christians captive in a pagoda in southeastern Bangladesh after severely beating them in an attempt to force them to return to Buddhism, Christian sources said.

Held captive since April 16 are Pastor Shushil Jibon Talukder, 55; Bimol Kanti Chakma, 50; and Laksmi Bilas Chakma, 40, of Maddha Lemuchari Baptist Church in Lemuchari village, in Mohalchari sub-district of the mountainous Khagrachari district, some 300 kilometers (186 miles) southeast of Dhaka. They are to be kept in the pagoda for 15 to 20 days as punishment for having left the Buddhist religion, the sources said.

Local Buddhists are considered powerful as they have ties with the United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF), an armed group in the hill districts.

After taking the Christians captive on April 16, the sources said, the next day the armed Buddhist extremists forced other Christians of Maddha Lemuchari Baptist Church to demolish their church building by their own hands. The extremists first seized all blankets, Bibles and song books from the church building.

The sources said two UPDF members went to Pastor Talukder's house at 7 a.m. on April 16, telling him to go to a Buddhist community leader's house in a nearby village. The Buddhist leader also ordered all members of the Baptist church to come to his house, and about 15 Christians did so.

After a brief dispute, the Buddhists chose the pastor and the two other Christians and began beating them, seriously injuring the pastor. They then took them to a nearby pagoda for Buddhist baptism, shaving their heads and dressing them in saffron robes as part of a conversion ritual.

The sources said Pastor Talukder was bludgeoned nearly to death.

"The pastor was beaten so seriously that he could not walk to the nearby pagoda," said one source. "Buddhist people took him on a wooden stretcher, which is used for carrying a dead body for burial or cremation."

Pastor Talukder was treated in the pagoda with intravenous, hypodermic injections that saved his life, the source said.

The Buddhist extremists were said to be forcing other Christians to undergo Buddhist baptism in the pagoda and to embrace Buddhism.

A source in Khagrachari district told Compass that local UPDF Buddhists had been mounting pressure on the Christians since their church began in the area in early 2007.

"They gave vent to their anger on Christians in a violent outburst by beating the pastor and two others after failing several attempts in the past to stop their evangelical activities," the source said. "They took them into a pagoda to convert them forcibly to Buddhism."

In June the Buddhists had threatened to harm Pastor Talukder if he did not give up his Christian faith. The pastor escaped and hid in different churches for two months. Later he came back in the area and began his pastoral and evangelical activities anew.

"They also made threats and gave ultimatums to three or four other churches in the locality to try to force them to come back to Buddhism," the source said.

'Social deviation'

Regional Sub-district Chairman Sona Ratan Chakma told Compass that the "three renegade Buddhists" are being kept in the pagoda for religious indoctrination.

"They became Christian, and they were breaking the rules and customs of the Buddhist society, so elders of the society were angry with them," Chakma said. "That is why they were sent to a pagoda for 15 to 20 days for their spiritual enlightenment, so that they can come back to their previous place [Buddhism]."

Chakma said the Christians have not been tortured but given punishment proportionate to the gravity of their "social deviation."

"They were punished so that they can come to their senses," he said.

Under siege

The Rev. Leor P. Sarkar, general secretary of Bangladesh Baptist Church Fellowship, told Compass that the UPDF's ultimatum was of grave concern.

"This armed group issued an ultimatum that by April 30 all Christians should come back to Buddhism, otherwise all of them will face the same consequences," said Sarkar.

Christians are virtually in a state of siege by the UPDF, he said. None of them go to church buildings on the traditional worship days of Friday or Sunday, instead worshipping in their own houses.

Sarkar added that the tribal Christians do not have any political conflict with the UPDF.

"They simply persecute them for their faith in Christ," he said. "Their only demand to us is to go back to Buddhism."

The UPDF's order to give up their faith is a matter of life and death, Sarkar said.

"A ripple of unknown fear gripped the entire Christian community there," he said. "Everybody took fright from that menacing cruelty. The everyday life of Christians is hampered, beset with threats, hatred and ostracism. So it is a social catastrophe."

The church leader urgently appealed to local government officials to come to the aid of the kidnapped Christians.

The UPDF is one of two main tribal organizations in the hill districts, the other being the United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti, or PCJSS). The PCJSS, formed in 1973, had fought for autonomy in the region for 25 years, leaving nearly 8,500 troops, rebels and civilians killed. After signing a peace accord in 1997 with the Bangladesh government, the PCJSS laid down arms.

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Last year the PCJSS demanded that the government ban the UPDF for their terrorist activities in the hill districts.

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