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## **Bangladeshi Christians cleared of wrongdoing face new charge**

### **Police claim foreign doctor's Christian literature offended Muslims**

Special to Compass Direct News

Compass Direct News (11.07.2011) / HRWF (12.05.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.net> – Police in Bangladesh have charged two Christians and their four Muslim friends with “hurting religious sensibility” just three days after they were cleared of any wrongdoing.

The accused will appear in court tomorrow to face the charges, which were filed against them three days after they were exonerated on April 10. They had been arrested on March 24 in Damurhuda, Chuadanga district, some 210 kilometers (126 miles) northwest of Dhaka, under Section 54 of the penal code, which provides a special power to police to arrest anyone on any suspicion. They were released on bail three days later.

Mannan Mridha, a pastor in the Way of Peace movement of 490 house churches in northwest Bangladesh, told Compass that the second case was filed only to stop Christian activities in the area.

“The case was also filed simply to harass the Christians,” Mridha said.

Carpas Danga camp police from the Damurhuda police station on April 13 charged the men with “hurting religious feelings” of area Muslims after a foreign doctor offered Bibles to patients at a health camp where the accused were volunteering. The accused men, including the four Muslims previously misidentified as Christians, appeared in district court on June 1.

A group of Christians under the direction of the Way of Peace movement had arranged a two-day health camp offering free treatment to poor villagers in Damurhuda earlier this year. Around 100 villagers attended the camp for free treatment on March 23, and a Japanese doctor treated them. The next day, more than 400 people were supposed to attend the health camp.

The Japanese volunteer doctor offered Christian leaflets and Bibles to the patients, telling them they were under no obligation to take the literature, sources said. Area Muslims stirred up residents against the doctor, according to police, and the angry villagers had police arrest the Christians. The foreign doctor was not named in either of the cases filed against the six nationals.

“These books seriously hurt the religious sentiments among the Muslims,” police charged in the second case. “After thorough investigation, we found it true that the accused were engaged in the activities of hurting religious sentiments.”

One of the accused, 30-year-old Christian convert Nurul Islam, told Compass that the Japanese doctor had discussed with villagers the devastation of the earthquake and the tsunami that ripped through northeastern Japan on March 11, showing some pictures of its destruction published in newspapers.

"He also talked about life, how transient it is, and also about eternal life in the after-world," said Islam. "He recited some verses from the Bible about eternal life and how to achieve it. Then he told the people that he had Bibles, so anyone could take them if they liked."

The volunteers at the clinic said they did not expect the doctor to offer this spiritual message.

"In fact, we were not informed and did not know that the Japanese doctor would distribute Bible among the patients," Islam said. "He did it spontaneously."

The Christians had obtained permission from the government to operate the free health camp. They had urged officials and police to provide protection to the doctor, as Maoist insurgents in western Bangladesh are known to kill and kidnap area residents. The government provided two policemen.

"The police investigation alleged that we were propagating Christianity under the cover of free treatment," Islam said. "If we had that kind of motive, we would not seek permission from the government and police. We would have done it secretly."

Villagers were not upset about the Bible distribution, he said.

"At that time a Cricket World Cup match was going on," he said. "So there was a huge hue and cry in a nearby club over the afternoon match."

Suddenly four policemen appeared in the health camp out of nowhere, he said.

"Police told us, 'For security reasons, you need to come with us. If you stay here, you will be in trouble,'" Islam said. "Police also said, 'We will let you free in the nearby Carpas Danga police camp.' But later they took us to the Damurhuda police station."

At the police station, officers confiscated their watches, mobile phones, belts, glasses and money, he said.

"Later police went to the hotel room that we had booked for guests coming from Dhaka," Islam said. "They went there and rummaged through everything. We had medicines there, which we did not find after the police search. Police arrested two Muslims from that hotel. In total, the role of police was very mysterious."

Way of Peace's Mridha said the police's witnesses were less than credible.

"In this case, police used three witnesses who are drug peddlers and smugglers living near the Indian border," he said. "Police did not use any good villager as a witness. Police should improve the law-and-order situation of the country, rather than put our lives in trouble."

### **Contradiction**

Under Section 54, police are required to submit a primary investigation report within 15 days of beginning prosecution, sources said.

A judge asked police to submit a report against the Christians about their accusations, but officers were unable to submit anything, they said. Receiving no convincing answers from police, the judge discharged all the accused Christians on April 10.

The second case filed by police Sub-inspector Jubaet Khan, however, claims, "The accused have done recognizable offense, and they were sent to the honorable court under section 54 of the penal code, and a report was submitted to the court."

The Bangladeshi constitution provides for people to propagate their religion subject to law, but authorities and communities often objected to efforts to convert people from Islam, according to the U.S. Department of State's 2010 International Religious Freedom report.

Bangladesh is the world's third-largest Muslim-majority nation, with Muslims making up 89 percent of its population of 164.4 million, according to Operation World. Christians are less than 1 percent of the total, and Hindus 9 percent.

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## **Villagers beat Christian for defending girls**

### ***Young Muslims who routinely harass female Christians mount assault***

Compass Direct News (12.05.2011) / HRWF (16.05.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.net> – Muslim villagers beat a 22-year-old Christian man last month for defending Christian girls against routine harassment and bullying, sources said.

Sipon Mondol was beaten on April 20 while returning to his native village of Nittanandapur from Gangni, Meherpur district, some 200 kilometers (120 miles) west of the capital city of Dhaka, his father said. On April 15, at a cultural event to celebrate the Bengali New Year, Poresh Mondol said his son had defended Christian girls against the slurs of a group of young Muslim men in an exchange that led to a gang fight.

"They were making some suggestive remarks to our girls at the program," Mondol said. "Some Christian boys, including my son, protested against it. A brawl between Muslim boys and the Christian boys followed the protest. They tried to drag my son to their village by getting hold of his shirt collar."

The Mondol family informed the young Muslim men's parents, and village elders assured the Christians that they would resolve the long-standing problem, telling them that such harassment would not happen again, he said.

"After the complaint, though, those Muslim boys became more predatory," he said. "They beat my son on his way home from Gangni town on the evening of April 20. He was severely beaten. He was treated in the hospital for one day and released on April 21."

The father of the young man told Compass that Christians were regularly shocked by the coarse language of their young Muslim neighbors at religious and cultural programs.

"To tease our girls, they use such filthy words in their speech that it leaves us feeling absolutely shattered," the elder Mondol said. "We suffer shame in front of our family members."

A case was filed against seven young Muslim men at nearby Titla village, asserting that they constantly harass Christian girls at Christian programs.

Lok Mondol, general secretary of the Church of Bangladesh in Meherpur district, told Compass that harassment of Christian girls at social and religious gatherings was a perennial problem.

"Previously we took several initiatives with the neighboring Muslim villagers to resolve this problem, but to no avail," he said. "This time, we resorted to the law by filing a case, because the problem was becoming more unbearable each day; we got our backs against the wall."

Mikha Mollick, a Christian belonging to a local Church of Bangladesh congregation, told Compass that continuous bullying of the Christian girls was an effort to gradually weaken Christians' social standing.

"Sometimes we are made to think we are not part of this society because of their misbehavior," Mollick said. "We live in a predominantly Muslim society here that is totally bankrupt of respect for Christians. We have nowhere to complain against them. Local political leaders care for us only for votes, but they do not like us at heart."

The indecency of the Muslim villagers, mainly the young men, is a constant source of irritation, but usually Christians refrain from objecting or filing complaints in order to avoid further troubles, Mollick said.

Gangni Police Inspector Motiur Rahman told Compass that authorities were taking "the proper steps" in response to the Christians' complaint but had so far arrested only one of the seven Muslim suspects – for harassing the girls, not for the assault.

"A case was filed against seven Muslim boys for bullying the Christian girls, mainly at the religious gatherings," he said. "But this case was filed following a beating of a Christian boy for his protest against bullying by Muslim boys of Christian girls at a cultural program. Both the Christian boys and Muslim boys quarrelled with each other on that day."

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## **Judge exonerates jailed evangelist**

***Judge rules Christian did not 'create chaos' by distributing literature near Islamic event***

By Aenon Shalom

Compass Direct News (31.03.2011) / HRWF (04.04.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - A judge this week exonerated a Christian sentenced to one year in prison for selling and distributing Christian literature near a major Muslim gathering north of this capital city, his lawyer said.

After reviewing an appeal of the case of 25-year-old Biplob Marandi, the magistrate in Gazipur district court on Tuesday (March 29) cleared the tribal Christian of the charge against him and ordered him to be released, attorney Lensen Swapon Gomes told Compass. Marandi was selling Christian books and other literature when he was arrested near the massive *Bishwa Ijtema* (World Muslim Congregation) on the banks of the Turag River near Tongi town on Jan. 21.

On Feb. 28 he was sentenced for "creating chaos at a religious gathering" by selling and distributing the Christian literature.

"Some fundamentalist Muslims became very angry with him for selling the Christian books near a Muslim gathering," Gomes said, "so they harassed him by handing over to

the mobile court. His release proves that he was innocent and that he did not create any trouble at the Muslim gathering.”

The judge reviewing the appeal ruled that Marandi proved in court that he sells books, primarily Christian literature, for his livelihood.

“I am delirious with joy, and it is impossible to say how happy I am,” said his brother, the Rev. Sallence Marandi, a pastor at Church of Nazarene International in northern Bangladesh’s Thakurgaon district. “I also thank all those who have prayed for my brother to be released.”

After processing the paperwork for Marandi’s release from Gazipur district jail, authorities were expected to free him by the end of this week, according to his lawyer.

“My brother is an innocent man, and his unconditional release proved the victory of truth,” Pastor Marandi said. “I am even more delighted because my brother’s release proves that he was very innocent and polite.”

The pastor had said his brother did not get the opportunity to defend himself at his original trial.

Marandi’s attorney on appeal argued that his religious activities were protected by the religious freedom provisions of the country’s constitution. The Bangladeshi constitution provides the right for anyone to propagate their religion subject to law, but authorities and communities often objected to efforts to convert people from Islam, according to the U.S. Department of State’s 2010 International Religious Freedom report.

Every year several million male Muslims – women are not allowed – attend the *Bishwa Ijtema* event to pray and listen to Islamic scholars from around the world. Some 9,000 foreigners from 108 countries reportedly attended the event, though most of the worshippers are rural Bangladeshis. About 15,000 security personnel were deployed to maintain order.

Bangladeshi Muslims equate the annual event with the Hajj, the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. This year the Bangladesh event was held in two phases, Jan. 21-23 and Jan. 28-30.

At the same event in 2009, Muslim pilgrims beat and threatened to kill another Bible school student as he distributed Christian literature. A patrolling Rapid Action Battalion elite force rescued Rajen Murmo, then 20, a student at Believers’ Church Bible College, on Feb. 1, 2009.

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## **Christian in Bangladesh goes to prison for evangelism**

***Evangelist given one year for ‘creating chaos’ by distributing literature***

By Aenon Shalom

Compass Direct News (23.03.2011) / HRWF (24.03.2011) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Christian has been sentenced to one year in prison for “creating chaos” by selling and distributing Christian books and other literature near a major Muslim gathering north of this capital city.

A magistrate court in Gazipur district handed down the sentence to Biplob Marandi, a 25-year-old tribal Christian, on Feb. 28 after he was arrested near the massive *Bishwa Ijtema* (World Muslim Congregation) on the banks of the Turag River near Tongi town on Jan. 21.

A copy of the verdict says that he was sentenced according to Section 296 of Bangladeshi law 1860 for “creating chaos at a religious gathering.”

“Duty police found Marandi creating chaos as he was propagating his religion, Christianity, by distributing the tracts as a mobile court on Jan. 21 was patrolling near the field of the *Bishwa Ijtema*,” the verdict reads. “The accusation – creating chaos at a Muslim gathering by distributing Christian booklets and tracts – against him was read out in the court before him, and he admitted it. He also told the court that he had mainly wanted to propagate his religion, Christianity.”

The Rev. Sailability Marandi, pastor at Church of Nazarene International in northern Thakurgaon district and older brother of Biblop Marandi, told Compass that there was no altercation when his brother was distributing Christian tracts; likewise, the verdict makes no mention of any confrontation.

“I guess some fanatic Muslims found my brother’s works un-Islamic,” he said. “They created chaos and handed over my brother to the police and the mobile court.”

Pastor Marandi said he could not understand how a court could determine that one man could disturb a gathering of hundreds of thousands of Muslims.

“Fanatic Muslims might say this impossible thing, but how can the honorable court can say it?” he said. “In the verdict copy it is written that my brother admitted his offense in the court. This case being very religiously sensitive, I suspect that his confession statement might have been taken under duress.”

Pastor Marandi said his brother was selling Christian books to supplement his livelihood as an evangelist on a street near the event, and there were many curious pedestrians of all faiths among Muslims from around the world.

“Where there were more people, he would go there for selling books and distributing Christian tracts,” he said.

The pastor said he was surprised that Marandi was convicted and sentenced so quickly.

“My brother did not get the chance for self-defense in court,” he said. “Without opportunity for self-defense, sentencing him for one year for evangelical activities was a travesty of justice. It cannot be accepted in a democratic country.”

He added that the family hired a Muslim lawyer for Marandi who did little for him.

“If he had worked, then there would have been cross-examination regarding the confession statement,” Pastor Marandi said. “I think that some Muslim fanatics could not tolerate his evangelical activities near the religious gathering place and handed him over.”

The family has since hired a Christian attorney, Lensen Swapon Gomes, who told Compass that he filed an appeal on Monday (March 21) as Marandi's religious activities were protected by the religious freedom provisions of the country's constitution.

"I appealed to the court for his bail and also appealed for his release from the one-year punishment," said Gomes. "I hope that the honorable court will consider his case, because he is an innocent man and a victim of circumstances. The offense for which he is convicted is bailable."

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Jagadish Edward, academic dean of Gloria Theological Seminary in Dhaka, told Compass that Marandi had engaged in evangelical work after completing three years at the seminary in 2005. Marandi had come to Dhaka from northern Thakurgaon district some 400 kilometers (249 miles) away.

"He was very polite and gentle," said Edward. "As an evangelist, he knew how to respect other religions. I was really surprised when I heard he was arrested and sentenced for one year."

At the same event in 2009, Muslim pilgrims beat and threatened to kill another Bible school student as he distributed Christian literature. A patrolling Rapid Action Battalion elite force rescued Rajen Murmo, then 20, a student at Believers' Church Bible College, on Feb. 1, 2009.

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