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## **Bangladesh government fund makes generous donation to 26 Christian churches**

AsiaNews (06.12.2014) - The Christian Religious Welfare Trust donated 2.1 million taka (US\$ 27,500) for pastoral work and renovation to 26 Christian churches in Bangladesh.

Made during a ceremony held last Monday in Dhaka, the contribution is of particular importance, because it is the work of a government body in a predominantly Muslim nation where Christians represent 0.4 per cent of the population - 0.1 per cent in the case of Catholics.

Established in 2009, the fund is designed to contribute to national development through the development of its human resources and by encouraging solidarity between people of different faiths.

Speaking to *AsiaNews*, Religious Affairs Minister Motiur Rahman, who also chairs the Christian Religious Welfare Trust, said, "We want the faithful of all religions to follow their beliefs freely. Through this fund, we promote religious harmony and brotherhood".

During the ceremony, the minister also noted that Bangladesh is a secular country and that its constitution protects religious rights.

"We believe," he explained, "that if people of all religion can practice their religious rituals properly, our country will advance with prosperity and peace".

Fr Hubert B. Rebeiro, 44, is the parish priest at Jhoragopalpur, in the Diocese of Rajshahi. His church is one of those that received funding.

"I am very pleased that government gave me financial support for church's activities. since we are in a predominantly Muslim country, it is a big deal for us," he told *AsiaNews*.

The Christian Religious Welfare Trust received on an initial grant of 50 million taka (about US\$ 650,000).

Since 2009, it has helped 91 churches, for a total outlay of 9.5 million taka (US\$ 125,000).

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## **Two Protestant clergymen on trial in Bangladesh for alleged "forced conversions"**

Asia News (25.11.2014) - Two Protestant clergymen are awaiting trial in Bangladesh on charges of inducing Muslims to convert.

The incident occurred in mid-November when some 200 Muslims attacked the Christian religious leaders - anonymous for security reasons.

The two clergymen, who belong to Faith Bible Church of God, were celebrating baptisms in the northern district of Lalmonirhat, 341 kilometres from Dhaka.

A source told *AsiaNews* that some members of the local Muslim community - perhaps incited by conservative imams - were angered by reports that Muslims were set to undergo baptism, and so stormed the site.

The police intervened and arrested 45 Protestants, including two pastors. A few hours later, the faithful were released, but the Protestant religious leaders remained in prison.

Some imams filed a complaint for "forced conversions" against them. Because of pressure from Islamic leaders, the authorities at first denied the two bail.

After a second request, on 18 November, police released the Protestant clergymen, who now have to stand trial.

Bangladesh does not have anti-conversion laws. Islam is the state religion, practiced by about 89.5 per cent of the population. Catholics are only 0.1 per cent.

The Constitution does not recognise Sharia (Islamic law) and guarantees full religious freedom; however, [conversions](#) to a different religion are often opposed.

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## **Bangladesh 'Hajj critic' AL Siddique is arrested**

BBC News (25.11.2014) <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30195714> - A senior Bangladeshi politician who criticised the annual Hajj pilgrimage made by Muslims to Mecca has been arrested in Dhaka.

Abdul Latif Siddique was denied bail and sent to jail on charges of insulting Islam.

Mr Siddique returned from India on Sunday after a long trip abroad.

Calls for his arrest came after he told a gathering in New York in September that he was "dead against the Hajj". He was subsequently sacked as a minister.

His comments triggered an angry reaction among hard line Islamist parties, who staged protests.

They and other opposition political parties demanded the former telecommunication minister's immediate arrest.

### ***'An apostate'***

Television footage from the US showed Mr Siddique telling a Bangladeshi expatriate audience in New York that he opposed the Hajj, and that the Prophet Mohammed had established it partly for commercial reasons.

"Two million people have gone to Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj. [It] is a waste of manpower. Those who perform Hajj do not have any productivity," he said.

"They [Hajj pilgrims] deduct from the economy [and] spend a lot of money abroad."

After Mr Siddique's remarks were broadcast, hard line Islamist group Hefajat-e-Islam declared him "an apostate".

More than 20 cases were filed against him on charges of hurting the religious sentiments of Muslims. A court also issued several warrants for his arrest, prompting Mr Siddique to prolong his stay in the US and India.

Islamist groups issued a 24-hour deadline for the government to arrest him soon after his return to Bangladesh. Some have even called for him to be executed.

He has yet to be charged since handing himself in to police.

In an interview with the BBC in India in October Mr Siddique said that his comments were made in an informal briefing and not in front of a large audience. He expressed regret that he had "embarrassed" his leader.

Mr Siddique, 77, fought for Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971. He was a trusted aide to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has voiced her displeasure over his comments.

Feminist writer Taslima Nasreen was also accused of "hurting the emotions of Muslims" in her writings of the early 1990s. She had to flee the country following a public outcry and now lives in India.

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**Islamic extremists attack Protestant school: students and teachers injured**

AsiaNews (07.11.2014) - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Bangladesh,-Islamic-extremists-attack-Protestant-school:-students-and-teachers-injured-32634.html> - The incident happened in the district of Gazipur. Muslim radical leaders spread rumors that the institution "forces" students to convert to Christianity.

At least 45 Islamic extremists attacked a Protestant school of Arambaugh (Gazipur district), Bangladesh. The attack took place yesterday and ten people, including teachers and students, were injured. The group attacked the institution - the Steve Kim Mission School - after "rumors" the structure forced Muslim students to convert to Christianity. Police arrested five people suspected of being involved.

School principal Michael Mandal, said: "A local group vandalized the school and attacked the teachers, after someone had put out the word that we converted students."

A resident of the area, the Muslim Rafiqul Islam, confirms what was said by the principal: "Some personalities and influential Islamic radicals linked to some schools, spread the news that Steve Kim Mission School practiced 'forced' conversions."

The school welcomes students of all faiths, from the first to the eighth grade. The school provides them with textbooks, school supplies and meals. In Bangladesh, Christian schools and colleges are considered the best. The Catholic Church has about 600 institutions (from primary school to high school), 10 colleges and a university. 90% of students are not Christian.

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## **Attack on nuns said to be first ever in Bangladesh**

World Watch Monitor (12.08.2014) - A mob of about 60 people armed with machetes, knives and iron rods raided a Catholic convent and beat up its nuns and priest - the Catholic mission in Rangpur district, 280 kilometers northwest of Bangladesh's capital city Dhaka. The attack was said to be the first attack of this kind in the country, according to the Bishop of the local diocese Dinajpur, Sebastian Tudu: "It's unprecedented because nuns are highly respected in Bangladesh. The attack is obviously a targeted and planned attempt at intimidation.

The July 7 attack including attempted rape and looting began around 2am and lasted for nearly two hours; consequently the incident led to multiple protests by thousands of Christians across the country.

Speaking with World Watch Monitor, Father Anthony Sen, Secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission in the Catholic diocese of Dinajpur, said the assailants of Boldi Pukur Catholic mission had ulterior motives including the seizure of the church's land.

According to UN-funded IRIN, a humanitarian news and analysis service, attacks on Bangladeshi minorities' property is increasingly common and 'it is not clear whether Islamist politics is behind the violence, or whether bandits are taking advantage of political instability to seize land and other assets from vulnerable groups.'

Of Bangladesh's 154 million people, Sunni Muslims constitute 90% and Hindus 9%, according to the 2001 census. The remaining 1% are mainly Christian and Buddhist.

"One of the major reasons for the attacks is occupying land and assets. If repeated attacks take place, Hindus [or any religious minority group] will migrate and this will help local [lawbreakers] to occupy the land," Rana Dasgupta the general secretary of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, told IRIN.

After a primary investigation, police found that a robbery had been committed in the convent but denied the allegation by clergy that the raid was a planned attack by local Muslims over a land dispute.

Rabiul Islam, inspector of Mithapukur police station under Rangpur district, told World Watch Monitor that robbery was the sole motive.

"Three teams perpetrated the robbery. We have arrested one team [12 people] so far. Our initial interrogation yielded that robbery was their motive," said Islam. Of the twelve, ten are Muslims and two are local tribespeople.

However Father Sen still isn't convinced: "One of the robbers asked the nuns, while beating [them], about the documents of the case regarding a current land dispute between the church and a local influential political leader." (The Church donated a piece of land to a school run by Muslims near the church. But the local political leader has tried to illegally occupy more of the church's land).

"The robber also asked where the Father and the nuns get money to continue the case regarding the land dispute," said Sen.

The authority of the Catholic mission filed a robbery case in the nearby police, without reporting any names.

The Bishop of Dinajpur Sebastian Tudu said: "The most recent attack is clearly a targeted response to Catholics' commitment to the country's poorest people."

### ***Details of the attack***

The robbers first entered the priest's house. After tying him up and beating him they proceeded to vandalize his home and steal his valuables.

Next they went to the medical house, inside the mission compound, where they beat a nun for information about the other nuns, and details regarding the location of the convent.

After vandalizing the convent they proceeded to beat up, and then to attempt to rape the nuns. In total there were seven nuns on location, of which three were beaten while the others managed to hide.

"The attackers tried to rape the nuns, but the women were saved by the grace of God. Their attempts to desecrate the vow of chastity of nuns for greater humanity and the service of God are shameful for us," said Sen.

"When local influential people try to illegally occupy the land of poor tribal Christians, the priest and nuns make a stand against it. So the attack could be planned to intimidate the Father and the nuns because of their having recourse to the poor people," said Sen.

### ***Increasing religious intolerance***

Formerly East Pakistan, Bangladesh was established in 1971. After 15 years under military rule, democracy was restored in 1990.

Despite a constitution that provides religious freedom, Bangladesh is officially an Islamic state. However, unlike neighboring Pakistan, the country does not struggle with blasphemy laws or any anti-conversion bills. Even with the nation's current democratic

liberties, Islamist extremist groups continue to try to modify the constitution and establish Shariah law.

According to the World Watch List, compiled by global ministry Open Doors, which works amongst minority Christians, Bangladesh ranks at number 48 on a list of the top 50 countries where Christians are most under pressure for their faith. The main source of persecution is Islamic extremism.

Speaking with World Watch Monitor, Open Doors said "Imams and influential Muslims persecute Christian believers, especially converts from Islam. Christians also face persecution from family and neighbours."

### ***Converts from Islam regularly attacked***

Sattar Miah, a Christian who was formerly Muslim, was attacked after a group of seven Muslims broke into his family's house in the early hours of June 29 in North Bangladesh: Manmath, Gaibandha District.

An Open Doors' worker who cannot be named due to security told World Watch Monitor, "One of the attackers stepped onto Sattar's neck and was about to slit his throat with a dagger when his family began screaming, which alerted the neighbors, so that Sattar was rescued in time."

"They came with rods and daggers. They looted the house. When Sattar tried to stop them, they overpowered him and beat him," said the Open Doors worker.

Two months prior to the attack, Sattar Miah and 39 other Christians, who had also previously been Muslim, filed a complaint for the religious pressure they had been receiving from the village's Muslims.

"The police told the Muslims not to do any harm against us," Sattar's pastor said. "The Muslims were quiet for a while, and then they started pressuring the Muslim background believers to renounce their Christian faith and ask for forgiveness in the mosque. The Muslim background believers (known as MBBs for short) did not give in to them."

"For the past two years, these MBBs have been living under threat," said Open Doors' worker. "They are cut off from the community relations, kicked out of their work, and their children are maltreated in schools, but still they continue to stand firm in their faith in Jesus Christ."

### ***Political tensions have spilled over into violence***

The beginning of 2014 saw continuing violence and Human Rights Watch (HRW) said Bangladesh had "tumbled backward on human rights". In its recent [report](#), HRW said nearly 200 people were killed and thousands more were injured in violent street protests in 2013.

In addition to Bangladesh being criticised for its human rights record, another concern regards the treatment of the nation's women and allegations that police use torture against those in custody.

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## **Convent attacked, nuns molested: 12 Muslims arrested**

ICAN (17.07.2014) - Christians and rights groups in Bangladesh have demanded strict action against those who attacked a convent and tried to rape nuns, the first such incident in the Muslim majority South Asian nation.

"We want exemplary punishment of those involved in the case," said Nirmol Rozario, general secretary of the Bangladesh Christian Association.

According to Aid to the Church, a Church agency, armed men attacked the convent of PIME (Pontifical Institute of Foreign Missions) nuns in Boldipuku, a village mission in Dinajpur diocese in northern Bangladesh and tried to loot and rape nuns.

The July 6 attack, by some 60 men, was the first such instance of violence against a Catholic institution in Bangladesh.

Authorities have arrested 12 Muslims in connection with the incident.

"It's unprecedented because nuns are highly respected in Bangladesh," Bishop Sebastian Tudu of Dinajpur said. The 47-year-old Santal prelate said the nuns were beaten and molested. The violence only ended when police arrived.

The attackers had come to loot the mission, the bishop said.

Asianews reported that during the assault, three PIME nuns suffered attempted rape and they were sent to their provincial house in Dhaka, the national capital where they are trying to overcome the shock and mental suffering.

"It's very sad that the sisters cannot continue to work for the people, but our sisters are no longer safe," lamented Rosaline Costa, a Catholic human rights activist.

"I have lodged strong complaints over the attack on these religious sisters," she told Asianews. "If the Church is not safe nobody will go to the seminary or formation house to become priest or nun. It is a challenge for Church," she added and called for stringent punishment to the attackers.

Local Christians live in fear since the attack. The attackers, all Muslims, were looking for land deeds and valuables. It is not the first time they have tried to steal them the land documents, local people said.

The attack began at 2 am on July 6. The attackers first tied the hands and legs of the mission's two night watchmen and gagged them. They then broke down the door of the room where the assistant pastor Father Anselmo Marandy was sleeping. They raided the convent located in the mission campus.

The PIME nuns manage a primary school in Boldipukur. The attackers wanted to know where the land documents deeds were and even beat up the nuns.

The parishioners are mostly poor and illiterate tribal people and often Muslims try to take over their land. The Diocesan Commission for Justice and Peace is working on this problem, but with poor results.

They may also have been looking for land-ownership deeds, which were believed to be left by poor and illiterate members of the community for safekeeping at the mission.

Christians form only 0.8 percent of Dinajpur district's 3 million people. Muslims account for nearly 77 percent followed by Hindus 21 percent.

The district was once part of the ancient state of Pundravardhana that came under the British in 1786. At the time of Partition of Bengal in 1947, part of greater Dinajpur district was included in West Bengal as West Dinajpur district.

Catholicism entered the area in the 17th century with the arrival of Spanish Carmelite missionaries. Until mid-19th century, the area was part of the Krishnagar Mission, now Krishnagar diocese in West Bengal. PIME missionaries, who first came to work in the area in 1855, continue to work there.

In 1952, five years after the partition of the subcontinent, the territory comprising the current Indian dioceses of Dumka, Raiganj and part of Jalpaiguri was detached from the Diocese of Dinajpur. In January 1976, Pabna district along with St. Rita's Parish in Mathurapur was transferred from Dhaka archdiocese to Dinajpur diocese so that it covered the whole of Rajshahi Division, across Jamuna and Ganges rivers.

In 1990, the southern areas were detached to form the Rajshahi diocese.

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## **Rohingya Muslim refugees can no longer wed in Bangladesh under new marriage ban: Report**

The Huffington Post (10.07.2014) - Bangladesh law minister Syed Anisul Haque announced on Thursday that the country would cease officiating marriages for Rohingya Muslims, an ethnic minority group that has been displaced from Myanmar due to persecution.

The marriage ban affects Rohingyas attempting to wed one another and those seeking unions with Bangladeshi nationals, the Malaysian Insider reports. Haque claimed that Rohingyas seek marriages in order to obtain Bangladeshi passports and even citizenship for those marrying country nationals, which the ban would prevent.

Marriage registrars face disciplinary action if they fail to comply, law ministry spokesman Abdullah Al Shahin said.

Lifestyle restrictions are nothing new for Rohingya Muslims, who the U.N. considers to be among the most persecuted minority groups in the world. Rohingyas are denied citizenship in Myanmar, and more than 100,000 have fled their homes in recent years to escape brutal attacks -- often carried out by Buddhist extremists in the country.

Because they lack citizenship in Myanmar, Rohingyas are unable to move, marry or find jobs without permission from the government. Despite the restrictions on marriage, Rohingya couples are only allowed to live together if they are married and then are subject to a strict two-child policy. Bearing children out of wedlock is prohibited.

There are roughly 300,000 Rohingyas living in Bangladesh, though the country recognizes only about 30,000 who are eligible for food, housing and other basic aid provided by the U.N. Other Rohingya refugees are dispersed in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

"They live under open sky, with no support from the United Nations or the Bangladeshi government," human rights activist and Rohingya refugee Nijam Mohammed told Al Jazeera. "People are dying every day, there is a lack of food, treatment and education. You can't imagine how life is."

Although the Rohingyas say they originally come from western Myanmar, Buddhist extremists say they immigrated illegally from Bangladesh in the 1800s with British imperial troops. Bangladesh border guards regularly intercept Rohingyas attempting to cross the Myanmar border, though on either side Rohingyas risk discrimination, poor living conditions and even human trafficking.

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## **Hindu households, temple attacked in Bangladesh**

Yahoo! News (05.05.2014) - An around 3,000-strong mob attacked Hindu households and a temple in Bangladesh's Comilla district, media reported Monday.

The attacks took place Sunday after rumours were spread over loudspeakers that two youths had defamed Prophet Muhammad, bdnews24.com reported.

Locals and police said teachers and students of eight madrasas in Homna upazila led the assault on Hindus at Baghsitarampur village.

Twenty-eight families have been affected in the attacks.

A mob of nearly 3,000 carried out the attacks and looted belongings of the Hindus, most of whom were poor farmers and fishermen.

Villagers said a call was made from the loudspeakers at Jamia Arabia Islami Emdadul Ulum Madrasa at Rampur village near Baghsitarampur to launch the attack on Hindus.

Before the assault, leaflets were distributed for the last several days in the madrasas claiming that two Hindu youths had slandered the prophet in a Facebook post April 27.

Police arrested the principal of Bagmara Madrasa at Muradnaga in connection with the attacks. However, the main accused, Nazrul Islam, who took the lead in distributing the leaflets is still at large.

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## **Hundreds of Hindus attacked in post-poll violence in Bangladesh take shelter in temples**

India Today Online (07.01.2014) - Hundreds of Hindu families had to flee their homes following post-poll violence in different districts in neighbouring Bangladesh and are too scared to return as the administration could not ensure their security.

According to The Daily Star and several other newspapers, activists of main Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its key-ally fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami attacked Hindu households in western Jessore and northwestern Dinajpur as soon as the voting ended on Sunday afternoon.

Media report said that BNP and Jamaat men looted, vandalised and burned Hindu houses in Thakurgaon, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bogra, Lalmonirhat, Rajshahi, Chittagong and Jessore.

The Daily Star quoted villagers as saying that the attacks came following their decision to cast votes despite a warning from Jamaat men.

The villagers told reporters that 400-500 Jamaat activists exploded about 250 bombs, vandalised a hundred houses and torched 10 to 12 others.

Of around 1,200 to 1,500 people in the village, inhabited mostly by fishermen, 700 fled their houses soon after the attack. They took shelter in nearby villages while some of them hid in orchards.

Hundreds of others took refuge at a temple in Goreya upazila since Sunday night in fear of attacks by Jamaat-BNP men.

According to The Daily Star, locals said they had called police, ruling Awami league leaders and the administration over the mobile phones but nobody came to help. Police were seen after 9:00pm, when it was all over.

The newspaper's correspondent, during a visit to Tahukrgaon on Monday afternoon found about twelve hundred people from five hundred Hindu families of Gopalpur village sheltered at an Iscon (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) temple.

In Dinajpur, at least 350 houses and 50 shops were damaged, set ablaze and looted. According to locals, around 2,000 Jamaat men armed with sharp weapons and sticks launched the attack at Kornai village on Sunday evening.

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