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Search

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[Search](#) | [About RIRs](#) | [Help](#)

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Bangladesh: The situation of Christians; the availability of state protection and of internal relocation (2004 - 2006)

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Situation of Christians in Bangladesh

Approximately 88 per cent of the population of Bangladesh is Muslim, while 10 per cent is Hindu (IDMC 28 Mar. 2006, 10; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 1). The remaining two per cent is mainly Christian or Buddhist (ibid.). There are an estimated 350,000 to 500,000 Christians living in Bangladesh (Dow Jones International News 24 Dec. 2005; *Hindustan Times* 25 Dec. 2005), the majority of whom are Catholic (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 1). *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* indicates that Bengali Christians are spread across Bangladesh, and that some indigenous (non-Bengali) groups are also Christian (8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 1).

Following October 2001 elections, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) formed a governing coalition that included two Islamic parties (Freedom House 6 July 2005; US May 2005, 125). Sources consulted by the Research Directorate indicate that since the 2001 elections, religious minorities have been targets of violence (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; IDMC 28 Mar. 2006, 7; Freedom House 2005). Islamic fundamentalists and BNP supporters have allegedly been responsible for attacks on religious minorities (US May 2005, 125; CSW 13 Dec. 2001; see also AI 23 May 2006).

Although the 2005 annual report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) suggests that attacks on religious minorities have "sharply" declined since the 2001 post-election period (US May 2005, 125), media and human rights sources consulted report indicate that violence against minorities continued (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; *Prothom Alo* 31 July 2005; *BosNewsLife* 5 Apr. 2005; OD 2006, 7; US May 2005, 125; U.S. Newswire 20 May 2005; CFI 17 Oct. 2005). Reported incidents against religious minorities, including Christians, have included killings (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; *Prothom Alo* 31 July 2005; *BosNewsLife* 5 Apr. 2005; OD 2006, 7; US May 2005, 125), sexual assaults (ibid.; U.S. Newswire 20 May 2005), extortion (*The Guardian* 21 July 2003; US May 2005, 125), intimidation (ibid.), forced eviction (CFI 17 Oct. 2005), and attacks on places of worship (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2).

In separate incidents in September 2004 and March 2005, two Christian

evangelists were reportedly beheaded by Muslim militants (BosNewsLife 5 Apr. 2005). The respective killings took place in the Jamalpur and Khulna districts of Bangladesh (ibid.). Three suspects were arrested in connection with the April 2005 killing (ibid.). Information on whether charges had been laid in connection with either the 2004 or the 2005 killing could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

In July 2005, two workers from a Christian non-governmental organization (NGO) were killed by unknown attackers (AFP 4 Aug. 2005; US May 2006; *Prothom Alo* 31 July 2005). Sources consulted suggest the two Christians were killed for showing an evangelical film (ibid.; US May 2006). Although several suspects were arrested in connection with the killings, all of the suspects were later released without charge (*Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 2.c). As of May 2006, no charges had been laid in connection with the murders (US May 2006).

According to Open Doors (OD), an evangelical Christian organization that provides religious materials, training and support to Christians around the world (OD n.d.), Christians, and particularly Muslims who convert to Christianity, are not safe in Bangladesh (ibid. 2006). According to the International Coalition for Religious Freedom, a US-based NGO (International Coalition for Religious Freedom n.d.), Muslim converts to Christianity generally do not openly practice their religion (ibid. 22 Apr. 2004; see also CFI 25 Oct. 2005). Sources consulted indicate that Muslims who convert to Christianity could face rejection by their families (*George Washington International Law Review* 1 Jan. 2006; CFI 25 Oct. 2005) and society (ibid.; see also International Coalition for Religious Freedom 22 Apr. 2004), and physical "danger" (*George Washington International Law Review* 1 Jan. 2006; see also International Coalition for Religious Freedom 22 Apr. 2004).

A May 2005 U.S. Newswire article reports that Christian Freedom International (CFI), a United States (US) based human rights organization, found evidence of "persecution" of Muslims who had converted to Christianity during a fact-finding mission to Bangladesh (20 May 2005; see also CFI 25 Oct. 2005). Cited in the same article, the president of CFI indicated that Muslim women who convert to Christianity may be subject to beatings, abduction, rape, forced marriage and forced reconversion to Islam. Specific reports of Muslim women who converted to Christianity being subject to such treatment could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Availability of state protection

Although Bangladesh has acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN 9 June 2004), human rights and news sources suggest Bangladeshi authorities have done little to protect the rights of religious minorities (IDMC 28 Mar. 2006, 7; HRW Jan. 2006; U.S. Newswire 20 May 2005). According to Amnesty International (AI), attacks on religious minorities, including Christians, have been carried out with "apparent impunity" (23 May 2006; see also *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2; US May 2005, 125). The government reportedly downplayed news of attacks following the October 2001 elections (ibid.; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 2). According to the 2005 USCIRF annual report,

[t]he lack of accountability for reported crimes against minority group members during the last election raises serious concerns about an atmosphere of impunity for such crimes, as well as the possibility of a renewal of violence against Hindus and members of other religious minorities in the next elections (US May 2005, 125).

The USCIRF 2006 annual report indicates that human rights activists are also

concerned that "manipulation of the voting rolls to specifically exclude or burden persons with names associated with religious minority communities, coupled with active voter intimidation, may keep religious minorities from exercising their right to vote" (US May 2006, 205). Bangladesh's next elections are expected to take place in January 2007 (BBC 14 June 2006).

The government has, however, taken measures to provide security at places of worship of religious minorities around the country (Dow Jones International 24 Dec. 2005; *Hindustan Times* 25 Dec. 2005). During Christmas celebrations in 2005, the government reportedly tightened security at churches across the country following a series of Islamic militant bombings earlier that year (ibid.; Dow Jones International 24 Dec. 2005).

Availability of internal relocation

Christian Freedom International (CFI) reports that in July 2005, a Bible school was forced to move from its location in Khulna District due to threats from Islamic militants (CFI 17 Oct. 2005). The school relocated to South Sayabithi, 15 kilometres north of Dhaka; however, once at the new location, the school reportedly received new threats from local Muslims (ibid.).

No further information on the availability of internal relocation for Christians could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

In its 2006 *Annual Report*, Human Rights Watch (HRW) claims that, due to the rise of religious intolerance, hundreds of thousands of Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists have fled Bangladesh over the past few years (Jan. 2006).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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[Top of Page](#)

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