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Bangladesh: Societal attitudes towards handicapped people, including those who are deaf and mute, and the treatment of those who promote their rights by the authorities and the Jamaat-e-Islami (2000-2004)

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Background

A February 2004 report presented by the Bangladesh Protibandhi Kallyan Somity (BPKS), a regional affiliate of Disabled Peoples' International (DPI 2002) and one of the largest organizations assisting disabled people in the country (APCD 28 Apr. 2004), explained that there is a wide range of estimates on the number of disabled people within the country (BPKS 13-17 Feb. 2004). However, international and domestic non-government organization (NGO) sources such as the World Health Organization and the National Forum of Organizations Working With the Disabled have reported that handicapped or disabled persons make up between 10 per cent (BPKS 13-17 Feb. 2004; CRP n.d.) and 14 per cent of the country's population (*Country Reports 2003* 25 Feb. 2004, Sec. 5). In addition, the BPKS report noted that of the total number of disabled persons recorded in 1998 by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 31.3 per cent were visually disabled, 27.5 per cent were physically disabled, 28 per cent were hearing and speech disabled, 4.9 per cent were mentally disabled, and 8.3 per cent were impaired with Leprosy or Goiter (BPKS 13-17 Feb. 2004). With regard to persons with hearing disabilities, according to Ethnologue, a language reference Website sponsored by SIL International, as of November 2003 there were approximately 7.6 million deaf persons in Bangladesh (Nov. 2003).

Situation and Societal Attitudes

Country Reports 2003 noted that, for economic reasons, many families were unable to take proper care of members with disabilities and that "superstition and fear of persons with disabilities sometimes resulted in their isolation" (25 Feb. 2004, Sec. 5). According to the 2004 BPKS report, the major difficulties faced by persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Bangladesh include the following:

- Access to medical services is deficient; facilities are inadequate and there is a lack of specialists to address PWDs;
- Access to education is poor; there is a lack of facilities and teachers; tuition is very costly. Disabled students face discrimination and are "ridiculed" by

other students, and many parents do not want their children to study alongside disabled students;

- Access to employment in both the public and private sector is generally not available for PWDs; potential employers lack confidence regarding PWDs' ability to fulfil work duties;

- Access to transportation is deficient; despite three "accessible" buses made available in the capital city by a private transportation company in 2003, the overall transportation system in the country is totally inaccessible to PWDs;

- Children with disabilities (CWDs) are susceptible to diseases and sicknesses such as tetanus and acute respiratory infections, and malnutrition; they tend to suffer from discrimination by their own families in terms of food and clothing provided, and abuse by others; CWDs are among the most vulnerable groups in the country;

- Women with disabilities (WWDs) are deemed victims of "double disability" because of their status as women in Bangladesh and due to their disability; the needs of WWDs are generally ignored and social service facilities for these women are practically non-existent (13-17 Feb. 2004).

According to a 2004 International Women's Day report published on the Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP) Website, about 6.9 million women in Bangladesh are disabled (SDNP 18-22 Aug. 2003). As is also outlined in the BPKS report, WWDs from across the country face a number of challenges socially, educationally, economically and medically (ibid.).

Government Initiatives

Nevertheless, various sources reported that the national government has taken steps to address the needs and rights of disabled persons (*Country Reports 2003* 25 Feb. 2004; BPKS 13-17 Feb. 2004): In 1993, the Ministry of Social Welfare established a National Coordinaton Committee on Disability; in 1995 the government introduced a National Policy on Disabilities; and in 2001, the government approved the Disability Welfare Act (ibid.). According to *Country Reports 2003*, the 2001 Act "focuses on prevention of disability [and on] treatment, education, rehabilitation and employment, transport accessibility and advocacy" for disabled people (25 Feb. 2004). As well, during the 2004 First Session of the 8th National Parliament Assembly, the government of Bangladesh declared that disabled persons would be granted access to loan services and that 10 per cent of public service positions would be allocated to disabled persons (BPKS 13-17 Feb. 2004).

In 2003 and 2004, news sources reported on government assistance in the form of loans (BSS 10 June 2003), interest-free credit and grants (DNMS 3 May 2004) to physically disabled persons and acid survivors, and in October 2003, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia announced that one per cent of top public service positions would be reserved for disabled persons (BSS 25 Oct. 2003). In addition, according to a May 2004 report by the national news agency of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS), Prime Minister Khaleda Zia announced at an event for disabled people, that with the input of a taskforce involving 14 ministries, the national government was on the verge of implementing a nationwide plane to support education and personal development for disabled persons (13 May 2004). During the event, attended by various ministers, members of parliament, diplomats, and service chiefs, the Prime Minister also presented cheques for micro-credits, donations, wheelchairs, and Black Bengal goats to eight organizations and 29 disabled persons, and stated that disabled persons are entitled to the same rights as all other Bangladeshi citizens and should not be shunned

by society (ibid.).

NGO Support

There are also a large number of NGOs that have been established to assist disabled persons in Bangladesh (APCD 28 Apr. 2004; *Country Reports 2003* 25 Feb. 2004, Sec. 5). For example, the National Forum of Organizations Working with the Disabled (NFOWD) is an umbrella group that consists of between 80 (ibid.) and 144 (APCD 28 Apr. 2004) NGOs that assist disabled persons. With regard to deaf persons, the Bangladesh National Federation of the Deaf (BNFD) has been in place since 1963 and claims to be the only voluntary organization providing education and vocational training for the country's deaf population (DAA Nov. 1997). In a November 2003 news story, Harrish Chowdhury, President of the Bangladesh National Deaf Association and political secretary to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia noted that the government was establishing both a college for the deaf and dumb and a high-rise building for the deaf of Bangladesh (*The Bangladesh Observer* 20 Nov. 2003).

Information about the treatment by authorities and the Islamic fundamentalist group Jamaat-e-Islami of those who promote the rights of the disabled could not be found among the sources consulted.

Please refer to the March 2002 Country Profile on Disability published by the Planning and Evaluation Department of the Japan International Cooperation Agency, for a comprehensive overview of the situation of disabled persons in Bangladesh, including government policy and legislation, and disability-related organizations and their activities at: <http://www.jica.go.jp/english/global/dis/pdf/ban_eng.pdf>.

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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Internet sites: Amnesty International, Disability World, Freedom House, Human Rights
Watch, IRB databases, USC Canada, World Health Organization Bangladesh.

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