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## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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BGD41682.E

05 August 2003

Bangladesh: Update to BGD32321.E of 3 August 1999; recent treatment of Christians by Muslims and the political and police authorities

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Sunni Muslims represent 88 per cent of Bangladesh's 130 million people (*International Religious Freedom Report 2002* 7 Oct. 2002; ICC 6 June 2003). Another 10 per cent of the population are Hindu and the remaining 2 per cent are Christian, animist and Buddhist (*ibid.*; *International Religious Freedom Report 2002* 7 Oct. 2002). An Associated Press article estimates that there are approximately 300,000 to 350,000 Christians in Bangladesh (1 Mar. 2002).

According to Open Doors International (ODI), an evangelical Christian organization that provides religious materials, training, and support to Christians around the world, Christian practice in Bangladesh is ethnically divided into the Underground Church, which consists of those who converted from Islam, and the Visible Church, which consists of those who converted from Hinduism (n.d.). Moreover, the Underground Church can be divided into those who worship in secret and those who worship openly, such as when an entire village converts to Christianity (ODI n.d.).

Article 41 of the constitution of Bangladesh states that all citizens have the right "to profess, practice or propagate any religion" (ICC 6 June 2003). However, Open Doors International maintains that the predominantly lower income Christian population relies on foreign aid and "as a result, many people in Bangladesh, including the government, consider the Christians as foreign...[which] makes it easier for the regime to impose restrictions" (n.d.). International Christian Concern (ICC) reports the following limitations for members of the Christian community in Bangladesh:

[A]ll Christian organizations need to be registered as a Non-Government Organization (NGO), whose charter and board need to be presented to the government for approval. The board may be dismissed at any time and be replaced by another board appointed by the government.

The NGO Affairs Bureau has imposed restrictions on Bible printing and importation. Distribution of Bibles must be limited to Christians.

Proselytizing is permitted under the law. However, strong social resistance to conversion from Islam means most proselytizing is aimed at Hindus and tribal groups.

Foreign missionaries may work in the country but their right to proselytize

is not protected under the Constitution and they often have trouble obtaining visas (6 June 2003).

The *International Religious Freedom Report for 2002* states that while the government of Bangladesh has the ability to revoke the registration of an NGO, or limit its activities, "it rarely has used these powers, and they have not affected NGO's having religious affiliations" (7 Oct. 2002).

With respect to the relationship between religious groups in Bangladesh, the *International Religious Freedom Report for 2002* maintains that although religious groups are "generally amicable" toward one another, Hindu, Christian and Buddhist minorities perceive rising discrimination from the Muslim population (7 Oct. 2002). Moreover, several sources report that since the Islamic coalition government<sup>3/4</sup> composed of the BNP and three other Islamic parties<sup>3/4</sup> was elected in October 2001, tension among religious groups has increased in Bangladesh (HRWF 27 May 2003; BHBCUC 13 May 2003; Gulf News 23 Feb. 2003; Janet Matthews Information Services 9 Oct. 2002).

One Janet Matthews Information Services report describes the 2001 elections as "the bloodiest since the brutal war of independence...with more than 300 people murdered by militias in the run-up to the ballot" (ibid.). The same report states that although corruption was a main theme during the elections, "a clear division opened up between secularism and religious fundamentalism" (ibid.). Even though the ruling coalition party denies involvement with Muslim extremists (HRWF 27 May 2003), Amnesty International stated that supporters of the BNP "have allegedly been attacking Hindus and other religious minorities because of their perceived support for the rival Awami League party" (15 Oct. 2001; see also AFP 6 Oct. 2001).

In a speech at the 9<sup>th</sup> Session of the UNHR Sub-Commission's Working Group on Minorities, Sitangshu Guha of the New-York based Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC), stated that in the month following the October 2001 elections,

27 members of ... minority groups were killed, 269 women raped (reported), 2,690 males and 1,430 women were physically tortured, 100 men and women were kidnapped, 38,000 families dispossessed of their ancestral property, 1,550 temples and churches razed, and 4,551 dwelling houses and businesses set ablaze. ... [Furthermore,] out of the 228 incidents of rape cases [that were recorded] within the first 92 days of the new government, 225 or an overwhelming 98.7% were Hindus, Buddhists, or Christians (BHBCUC 13 May 2003).

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) reported that officials of the BNP "were linked to the harassment of Christians in the Natore district of northern Bangladesh" in December 2001 (27 May 2003). Citing the *Daily Janakantha*, HRWF reported the destruction of rice crops and the raping of women that affected over 50 Christian families in Chatiangacha village, Natore in December 2001 (27 May 2003). Members of Jubodol, "a local militant Islamic group," reportedly rode through the village threatening to rape teenage girls:

The riders would call out the name of a girl's father and demand ... a "donation." Families were given one week to pay [and] if they refused, the riders would return for their daughters.

In some cases where the fathers refused payment, they were summoned to the local office of the BNP. A section of the office was walled up to create an interrogation chamber. Accused villagers were brought into this room and forced to make confessions on false charges. They were then asked to pay

fines to "acquit" themselves. According to the *Daily Janakantha*, Sanaullah Norrababu, general secretary of the BNP in Natore, signed several of the summons documents (HRWF 27 May 2003).

HRWF also reported on a woman living in a southern Christian village who commented "she and her friends never leave the village alone, but always travel in a group, preferably with a male companion, to avoid harassment" (ibid.).

For further information on the situation of Christians in Bangladesh during 2001, please consult the attached interview that was conducted by the World Evangelical Fellowship's Religious Liberty Commission with a church leader in Bangladesh. The information was provided to the Research Directorate by a representative of the Canadian Christian organization, Voice of the Martyrs.

In February 2002, a Christian man from the Chatmohor region, north of Dhaka, had his house raided after he refused to give local gangsters money and alcohol that they demanded from him (AP 1 Mar. 2002). Twenty-five other Christians in the man's village were reportedly attacked and injured by the same gangsters (ibid.). According to the United News of Bangladesh, a case was filed against ruling party activists who were allegedly responsible for the attacks (1 Mar. 2002).

Also in 2002, bombs killed 18 people in cinemas during the month of December (AFP 24 Dec. 2002). In response to the bombings, armed police were posted in churches throughout the country on Christmas Eve (ibid.).

Moreover, the BHBCUC compiled over 400 media reports citing the abuse of religious minorities in Bangladesh from January to June 2002 (*Queens Tribune* 7-17 Nov. 2002). According to Sitangshu Guha of the BHBCUC, Islamic fundamentalist organizations are responsible for the "ethnic cleansing" of religious minorities in Bangladesh and

[s]ince 1947, the percentage of Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians in Bangladesh has dropped from 35 percent of the population to less than 10. People are being raped, murdered, and tortured every day (ibid.).

More recently, Hridoy Roy, a Christian evangelist was attacked by a group of "Muslim extremists" on 24 April 2003 and "is believed to be the first martyr in Bangladesh in modern times, if not ever," according to the Barnabas Fund (*Christian Monitor* 9 May 2003). Roy was reportedly stabbed to death after showing what is known as the "Jesus film" (ibid.; ICC 1 June 2003; HRWF 27 May 2003). HRWF states that while "some organizations claim this is the first martyrdom in the short history of Bangladesh...[it] is just one of many violent attacks against Christians in recent years (27 May 2003).

In May 2003, a Gospel for Asia missionary was kidnapped and held for ransom by a "terrorist group" but managed to escape in June (ANS 11 June 2003).

An article by the *The Prothom Alo* reported the rape and killing of a seventh grade Christian school student in Kalikapur village on 17 January 2003, although no detail was provided regarding the background of the assailants (18 Jan. 2003).

The police in Bangladesh are reportedly "slow to assist members of religious minorities who have been victims of crimes" (*International Religious Freedom Report 2002* 7 Oct. 2002).

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 to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

### Références

Agence France-Presse (AFP). 24 décembre 2002. « Bangladesh Tightens Security at Churches Ahead of Christmas ». (NEXIS)

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#### Autres sources consultées

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Les tentatives faites pour joindre les organismes suivants : le Réseau Asie-Pacifique des droits de la personne, secrétariat du centre de documentation des droits de la personne de l'Asie du Sud (Asia-Pacific Human Rights Network, Secretariat: South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre); le Réseau des droits de la personne au Bangladesh (Bangladesh Human Rights Network); le Centre pour une compréhension entre musulmans et chrétiens de l'université de Georgetown (Georgetown University's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding) et la Fédération interreligieuse et internationale pour la paix dans le monde (Interreligious and International Federation for World Peace) ont été infructueuses.

#### **Sites Internet, y compris :**

Association internationale pour la liberté religieuse

Center for Religious Freedom

*Christian Monitor*

Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities

Human Rights Watch

International Coalition for Religious Freedom

Mayer Dak

Newsnow: Bangladesh

Overseas Council International

Persecution.com

Université de Dacca

#### Document annexé

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