



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Bangladesh

Bangladesh – BGD37012 – Dhaka – Non-Muslims – Christians – Women – Communal violence – State protection – Muslim converts to Christianity – Internal relocation
21 July 2010

1. Please provide recent information on the treatment of non-Muslims in Bangladesh and specifically in Dhaka.

Despite a reported decrease in incidents of violence against religious minorities since the recently-elected Awami League took power in 2009, such incidents and general discrimination persist in Dhaka and regional districts with no effective protection being offered by local authorities.

According to the 2001 census, Sunni Muslims constitute 90 percent of the population of Bangladesh and Hindus 9 percent. The rest of the population is Christian (mostly Roman Catholic) and Theravada-Hinayana Buddhist. There are also small populations of Shi'a Muslims, Sikhs, Baha'is, animists, and Ahmadis. Estimates of their numbers vary from a few thousand to 100,000 adherents per group.¹

A 2003 paper on religious minorities in Bangladesh indicates that Bangladesh was considered a 'moderate Muslim' country until the October 2001 election, which brought into power a coalition between the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the 'fundamentalist' *Jamaat-e-Islami*. The paper claims that the BNP-led coalition failed to investigate or prosecute acts of severe violence, including killings, rape, land seizures, arson, and extortion against religious minorities, particularly Hindus, who were perceived to be allied with the then opposition Awami League. It further states that during that time radical groups felt that they enjoyed protection from the authorities and acted with impunity. It claims that the most militant group, the *Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami* (HUJI, or the Movement of Islamic Holy War), is reported to have 15,000 members and Bangladeshi Hindus and moderate Muslims hold them responsible for attacks against religious minorities, secular intellectuals and journalists.² The most infamous terrorist attack occurred in August 2005 when 527 bombs exploded in a massive attack on all but one of the country's 64 districts.³ The government suspected another Islamic extremist group, *Jamaat-ul-Mujahadeen Bangladesh*, as being responsible.⁴ According to the most

¹ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2009 – Bangladesh*, October, Section 1 – <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127363.htm> - Accessed 9 July 2010 – Attachment 1.

² Lintner, B. 2003, 'The Plights of Ethnic and religious Minorities and the rise of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh', Asia Pacific Media Services website, 2 February http://www.asiapacificms.com/papers/pdf/ethnic_and_religious_minorities_bangladesh.pdf - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 2; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2010, *Annual Report 2010*, May, p.324 <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/ar2010/additionally%20monitored%20countries.pdf> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 3.

³ Rogers, B. 2008, 'Bangladesh's secular democracy struggles with violent radical Islam' *The Cutting Edge*, 24 November – Attachment 4.

⁴ Kaplan, E. 2005, 'Backgrounder: BANGLADESH: Nationwide Attacks Raise Fears of Growing Islamist Presence' Council on Foreign Relations website, 29 August <http://www.cfr.org/publication/8767/bangladesh.html> - Accessed 21 July 2010 – Attachment 5.

recent edition of the *Political Handbook of the World*, there may be as many as 30 Islamic militant groups in Bangladesh.⁵

The 2008 general election, however, brought the centre-left, secular Awami League back to power and a new government under Sheikh Hasina took office on 6 January 2009.⁶ The 2009 US Department of State report on human rights practices in Bangladesh stated that, though reports of harassment and violence against religious minorities continued, the number of incidents significantly decreased in 2009.⁷ The US Commission on International Religious Freedom also removed Bangladesh from its 'Watch List' in 2009 as it considered the new government 'the most secular and favorably disposed toward minority rights among Bangladesh's major political parties'.⁸ It noted that in 2009 Bangladesh generally was free of Islamist violence that had escalated earlier in the decade.⁹ Nonetheless, the Commission noted that the new Bangladeshi government continues to show serious weaknesses in protecting human rights, including religious freedom, and 'religious extremism remains a persistent threat to rule of law and democratic institutions'.¹⁰ Both reports indicate that discrimination against members of religious minorities, such as Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists, continues to exist at both the governmental and societal levels, and religious minorities were disadvantaged in practice in such areas as access to government jobs, political office, and justice.¹¹

A range of sources also reported recent violent incidents against religious minorities which included killings, rape, torture, attacks on places of worship, destruction of homes, forced evictions, and desecration of items of worship, including attacks on the Hindu community and the Christian community.¹² In its 2010 report on the State of Minorities

⁵ 'Bangladesh' in Banks, A.S. & Muller, T.C. & Overstreet, N.R. & Isacoff, J.F (eds) 2010, *Political Handbook of the World 2010 Online Edition* http://library.cqpress.com/phw/document.php?id=phw2010_Bangladesh&type=toc&num=15 - Accessed 21 July 2010 – Attachment 6.

⁶ 'Bangladesh' in Banks, A.S. & Muller, T.C. & Overstreet, N.R. & Isacoff, J.F (eds) 2010, *Political Handbook of the World 2010 Online Edition* http://library.cqpress.com/phw/document.php?id=phw2010_Bangladesh&type=toc&num=15 - Accessed 21 July 2010 – Attachment 6; 'Bangladesh Awami League' 2010, Wikipedia website, 13 July (last updated) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Awami_League - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 7.

⁷ United States Department of State 2010, '2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices', US State Department website, 11 March, Section 2 www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/sca/136085.htm - Accessed 12 March 2010 – Attachment 8.

⁸ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2010, *Annual Report 2010*, May, p.324 <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/ar2010/additionally%20monitored%20countries.pdf> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 3.

⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2010, *Annual Report 2010*, May, p.324 <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/ar2010/additionally%20monitored%20countries.pdf> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 3.

¹⁰ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2010, *Annual Report 2010*, May, p.324 <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/ar2010/additionally%20monitored%20countries.pdf> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 3.

¹¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2010, *Annual Report 2010*, May, p.324 <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/ar2010/additionally%20monitored%20countries.pdf> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 3; United States Department of State 2010, '2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices', US State Department website, 11 March, Section 2 www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/sca/136085.htm - Accessed 12 March 2010 – Attachment 8.

¹² US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2009 – Bangladesh*, October, Section III – <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127363.htm> - Accessed 9 July 2010 – Attachment 1; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2010, *Annual Report 2010*, May, p.324 <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/ar2010/additionally%20monitored%20countries.pdf> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 3; United States Department of State 2010, '2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices', US State Department website, 11 March, Section 2 www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/sca/136085.htm - Accessed 12 March 2010 – Attachment 8; Minority Rights Group International 2010, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2010 – Bangladesh*, UNHCR Refworld website, 1 July

and Indigenous People in Bangladesh, Minority Rights Group International claimed that targeted gender violence is an integral part of the attacks against religious minorities and cited the example of the rape of the wife of a Christian pastor in Chaksing Baptist church in the village of Vennabari.¹³ This appears consistent with the prevalence of violence towards Bangladeshi women in general (see further analysis of this under Question 3.).

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom and the US Department of State, however, pointed out that in regards to incidents of violence against religious minorities, it is difficult to distinguish criminal intent from religious animosity or other possible motives and that the Government and many civil society leaders stated that violence against religious minorities normally had political or economic dimensions and could not be attributed solely to religious belief or affiliation.¹⁴ One would have to question, however, the motives of government and civil society leaders in attempting to deflect attention away from potential sectarian incidents.

A number of sources highlight that religious minorities are vulnerable to discrimination and violence due to their limited police influence and as a result of the corrupt and ineffective criminal justice system.¹⁵ The US Department of State notes that police corruption and ineffectiveness promoted a 'greater atmosphere of impunity' for acts of violence against minorities.¹⁶ (See Question 3. below for further information on state protection for religious minorities).

The situation for religious minorities in Dhaka appears to reflect the situation on the national level. According to Wikipedia, much like the rest of Bangladesh, Islam is the predominant religion in Dhaka, with the majority belonging to the Sunni sect. Hinduism is the second-largest religion and smaller communities practice Buddhism and Christianity. There are also significant Shi'a and Ahmadiya communities.¹⁷ A number of major human rights reports cite incidents of sectarian violence occurring in the capital of Dhaka.¹⁸

<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c33311f3c.html> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 9; Ghosh, R. 2010, 'Bangladesh: Still not safe for Minorities' quandaryreflection.blogspot.com, source: vijayvanni.com, 7 July <http://quandaryreflection.blogspot.com/2010/07/bangladesh-still-not-safe-for.html> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 10.

¹³ Minority Rights Group International 2010, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2010 – Bangladesh*, UNHCR Refworld website, 1 July <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c33311f3c.html> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 9.

¹⁴ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2009 – Bangladesh*, October, Section III – <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127363.htm> - Accessed 9 July 2010 – Attachment 1; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2010, *Annual Report 2010*, May, p.324 <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/ar2010/additionally%20monitored%20countries.pdf> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 3; United States Department of State 2010, '2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices', US State Department website, 11 March, Section 2 www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/sca/136085.htm - Accessed 12 March 2010 – Attachment 8.

¹⁵ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2009 – Bangladesh*, October, Section III – <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127363.htm> - Accessed 9 July 2010 – Attachment 1; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2010, *Annual Report 2010*, May, p.324 <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/ar2010/additionally%20monitored%20countries.pdf> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 3.

¹⁶ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2009 – Bangladesh*, October, Section III – <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127363.htm> - Accessed 9 July 2010 – Attachment 1.

¹⁷ 'Dhaka' 2009, New World Encyclopedia website, 23 January (last modified) <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Dhaka> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 11.

¹⁸ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2009 – Bangladesh*, October, Section III – <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127363.htm> - Accessed 9 July 2010 – Attachment 1; United States Department of State 2010, '2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices', US State Department website, 11 March, Section 2 www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/sca/136085.htm - Accessed 12 March 2010 – Attachment 8; Minority Rights Group International 2010, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2010 – Bangladesh*, UNHCR Refworld website, 1 July <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c33311f3c.html> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 9.

2. Please provide information on the treatment of Muslim converts to Christianity in Bangladesh (and particularly in Dhaka) and any reports of mistreatment and violence by the community and Muslim groups.

Christian Freedom International claimed that in 2005 (under the former government) there was ‘increased persecution’ of former Muslims, including in the capital Dhaka, and that women who have converted to Christianity are abducted, beaten, raped, and forced to marry and reconvert to Islam.¹⁹ Although there has been a reported decrease in incidents against religious minorities under the new government, Christian news agencies such as *Compass Direct News*, *BosNewsLife* and *AsiaNews.it* continue to regularly report on isolated incidents of mistreatment of Christian converts in Bangladesh. A sample of recent reports is outlined below:

2008

- The father of a man who converted from Islam to Christianity claims that he was ordered by Muslim leaders to disown his son.²⁰ The father claims he had received a letter from ‘Allahr Dal’ (Allah’s Group), an extremist Islamic group banned for its violent views. In it he is accused of being a “tool” of Christians to destroy Islam. They order him to “sacrifice” his son Rashidul because the latter’s conversion has brought into disrepute the whole Muslim community.²¹
- Buddhist villagers in a district in the Chittagong Hill Tracts allegedly assaulted a man and drove him from his house for converting to Christianity.²²
- Muslim villagers in Mymensingh district, eager to rid the area of the Christian work of a local pastor, allegedly gang-raped his 13-year-old daughter.²³
- A woman who had intended on converting to Christianity was burned alive in her home in Rangpur district.²⁴

2009

- A Christian convert reportedly had to flee his home to escape from a group of Islamic militants who wanted to kill him and his family, setting fire to their house.²⁵
- Muslims in a village in western Bangladesh reportedly forced two brothers to expel their parents from their home for converting to Christianity.²⁶

¹⁹ “Christian Converts Face ‘Kidnappings, Rape and Beatings’” 2005, *BosNewsLife*, 20 May <http://www.bosnewslife.com/740-christian-converts-face-kidnappings-rape-and> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 12.

²⁰ ‘Bangladesh Father Threatened after Conversion of Son’ 2008, *BosNewsLife*, 16 October <http://www.bosnewslife.com/3851-3851-bangladesh-father-threatened-after-conversion> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 13.

²¹ Gomes, W. 2009, ‘Dhaka, death threats against the family of a Christian convert from Islam’ *AsiaNews.it*, 8 May <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Dhaka,-death-threats-against-the-family-of-a-Christian-convert-from-Islam-15969.html> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 14.

²² Shalom, A. 2008, ‘Buddhists drive Bangladeshi Christian from home’, *Compass Direct News*, 26 December – Attachment 15.

²³ ‘Pastor’s 13-year-old daughter gang-raped’ 2008, *Compass Direct News*, 8 May – Attachment 16.

²⁴ ‘Bangladesh Christian Woman Burned For Seeking Baptism, Report’ 2008, *BosNewsLife*, 27 January <http://www.bosnewslife.com/3397-3397-bangladesh-christian-woman-burned-for-seeking> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 17.

²⁵ ‘Christian convert from Islam and family threatened with death’ 2009, *AsiaNews.it*, 30 September <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=16456&size=A> - Accessed 20 July 2010 – Attachment 18.

- Police in western Bangladesh allegedly tortured a pastor and two other Christians for proselytising.²⁷
- Muslim villagers in south eastern Bangladesh allegedly beat two evangelists for showing the “Jesus Film”.²⁸
- The pastor of a Baptist church south of Dhaka claimed that local Muslims tied him and his wife up, robbed his living quarters on the church property and gang-raped his wife. He then alleged that Police, influential villagers and local Muslim-owned media were trying to conceal likely anti-Christian motives for the crime by falsely accusing two Christians and a Hindu of participating – and labelling a local Baptist pastor as the “mastermind” of the attack.²⁹
- A Christian pastor in Meherpur district claimed that he had been regularly threatened by villagers as a result of his evangelizing.³⁰
- A Bangladeshi Muslim woman who travelled to the United States and converted to Christianity was under threat if she returned to Bangladesh. Her family claimed that they had been ostracized and expressed concern that a fatwa would be issued against her.³¹

2010

- Buddhist members of an armed rebel group and their sympathizers were allegedly holding three tribal Christians captive in a pagoda in south eastern Bangladesh after severely beating them in an attempt to force them to return to Buddhism.³²

The latest US Department of State report on human rights practices in Bangladesh also noted that ‘The law permits citizens to proselytize, and the government respected that right in practice, although local authorities and communities sometimes objected to efforts to convert persons from Islam’.³³ Despite the lack of wider reporting from other sources on these incidents it appears plausible that in a Muslim majority country in which radical Islam has gained ground over the years, that converts to Christianity would be at risk of harassment and violence.

Although the majority of reports appear to be in districts outside Dhaka city, it is plausible to suggest that no major incidents have occurred in Dhaka since the change in government in 2009 or that, due to past mistreatment, Christian converts remain discreet in the Capital.

²⁶ ‘Bangladesh Village Expels Couple For Embracing Christianity’ 2009, *BosNewsLife*, 19 January <http://www.bosnewslife.com/5166-bangladesh-village-expels-couple-for-embracing-christianity> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 19.

²⁷ ‘Police Torture Pastor, Two Others’ 2009, *Compass Direct News*, 4 August <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/bangladesh/4372/> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 20.

²⁸ ‘Muslim Villagers Beat Evangelists in Southeastern Bangladesh’ 2009, *Compass Direct News*, 1 June <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/bangladesh/4111/> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 21.

²⁹ ‘Pastor’s Wife Gang-Raped, Home Robbed’ 2009, *Compass Direct News*, 20 January <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/bangladesh/robbed/> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 22.

³⁰ ‘Muslims Threaten Pastor for Evangelizing’ 2009, *Compass Direct News*, 6 January <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/bangladesh/threat/> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 23.

³¹ Gomes, W. 2009, ‘The daughter converts to Christianity, Muslims marginalize the family’, *AsiaNews.it*, 22 June <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-daughter-converts-to-Christianity,-Muslims-marginalize-the-family-15579.html> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 24.

³² ‘Buddhist Extremists Beat, Take Christians Captive’ 2010, *Compass Direct News*, 23 April <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/bangladesh/17879/> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 25.

³³ United States Department of State 2010, ‘2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices’, US State Department website, 11 March, Section 2 www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/sca/136085.htm - Accessed 12 March 2010 – Attachment 8.

3. Please provide information on the availability of state protection for Muslim converts to Christianity and particularly for female converts.

Sources claim that the Bangladeshi government often fails to punish perpetrators, since the law enforcement and the judicial systems, especially at the local level, are vulnerable to corruption, intimidation, and political interference.³⁴ In its 2009 report on Bangladesh, the Asian Human Rights Commission outlined the levels of corruption that exists in criminal investigations:

It is difficult to lodge a complaint in a criminal case in a police station. It is also difficult to file a complaint case before the cognizance magistrate courts. Political leaders and other actors with vested interests try to influence the filing or lodging of criminal cases.... The police often refuse to record cases on political grounds... Strong persuasion is required to have immediate police action launched after a case is lodged. ... Investigative Officers (I.O.) have been found reluctant to arrest the offenders in cognizable cases if not persuaded to do so. The I.O. seldom visits places where crimes have been committed and often threaten to falsely implicate persons unless they are paid off. Witness statements are generally not properly recorded. Vital incriminating and evidentiary elements are purposely omitted. The police are reluctant to conduct identification parades. Allegations abound concerning the manipulation/falsification of laboratory reports, post-mortem reports and other medical information.³⁵

Christian converts would be even less likely to receive adequate state protection. A common element in media reports of mistreatment towards Christian converts were allegations of unresponsiveness by local police. In an extreme example reported by *Compass Direct News* in 2009, police in western Bangladesh allegedly tortured a pastor and two other Christians for proselytisation.³⁶ In another media report in 2007, when a group of Christian converts complained to police about threats and violence towards them by Muslims in their district, local Police refused to file the complaint and instead threatened to arrest them for 'converting Muslims'.³⁷

A female Christian convert would receive even less protection from local authorities than a male counterpart. Numerous sources indicate that women are not offered effective protection by local authorities due to their subordinate position in a highly patriarchal society.³⁸ A large number of sources regularly report on the situation of women in Bangladesh who are often victims of extreme violence such as acid throwing, dowry deaths, gang-rape, kidnapping, forced prostitution, torture, trafficking and even rape by police.³⁹ The level of violence towards women in Bangladesh is indicative of their weak

³⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2010, *Annual Report 2010*, May, p.326 <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/ar2010/additionally%20monitored%20countries.pdf> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 3.

³⁵ Asian Human Rights Commission 2009, *The State of Human Rights in Bangladesh in 2009*, p.60 <http://material.ahrchk.net/hrreport/2009/AHRC-SPR-001-2009-Bangladesh-HRReport2009.pdf> - Accessed 9 July 2010 – Attachment 26.

³⁶ 'Police Torture Pastor, Two Others' 2009, *Compass Direct News*, 4 August <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/bangladesh/4372/> - Accessed 19 July 2010 – Attachment 20.

³⁷ 'Muslims in Bangladesh threaten/abuse Christians' 2007, *Mission Network News*, source: *Compass Direct News*, 3 July <http://mnnonline.org/article/10084> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 27; Page. S. 2007, 'Officials in Bangladesh Offer Protection for Attacked Converts' *Compass Direct News*, 3 July – Attachment 28.

³⁸ United States Department of State 2010, '2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices', US State Department website, 11 March, Section 2 www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/sca/136085.htm - Accessed 12 March 2010 – Attachment 8.

³⁹ Mollah, A.H. (undated) 'Combating Violence against Women in South Asia: An Overview of Bangladesh' United Nations Public Administration Network website, p.13 <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/APCITY/UNPAN020004.pdf> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 29; 'Editorial: Domestic violence: Police can do more to curb it' 2008, *The Daily Star*, 15 March <http://www.thedailystar.net/story.php?nid=27726> - Accessed 21 July 2010 – Attachment 30; Odhikar 2010, 'Human Rights Monitoring Report January 01 – June 30, 2010' Odhikar website, 1 July, p.21

position in society and their lack of protection has further created a climate of impunity in which they have become regular victims.

Despite a ban on unofficial *fatwa* (religious edicts) by village religious leaders, women are also often the victims of extrajudicial punishments such as beating and whipping for alleged ‘moral transgressions’ such as adultery or talking to non-Muslim men.⁴⁰ No reports of a *fatwa* being issued against a female Christian convert were found but given apostasy may be a more serious crime in Islam than ‘moral transgressions’ it seems plausible that a *fatwa* may be issued against a Christian convert.⁴¹ In an article cited above, the family of a Bangladeshi woman who converted to Christianity expressed fear that a *fatwa* would be issued against her.⁴² Nothing in the article, however, indicates the basis for this fear.

4. Please advise on the possibilities of relocation for women in Bangladesh and whether there are any social, legal or religious factors that may impede relocation.

Although there are no legal impediments to relocation in Bangladesh, a woman’s mobility in Bangladesh, though generally restrictive, largely depends on their economic and social status, and potentially their marital status. A reasonable assessment of relocation prospects for a Christian convert would also take into account the religious demography of any new area.

There appear to be no legal obstacles to relocation in Bangladesh. The most recent US Department of State report advised that ‘The law provides for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights in practice except in the cases of some opposition political figures.’⁴³

Though sources indicate that religious minorities are generally accepted in Bangladeshi communities, the situation may differ for Christian converts. In 2007, the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship provided advice on relocation within Bangladesh and stated that, besides Buddhists who are largely concentrated in the Chittagong area, other religious communities are spread across the country and that ‘With a strong feeling of homogenous Bengali nationalism among the people, mixed societies are very common’. It also advised that religious minorities are easily accepted in a social community, with the exception of the ‘Ahmadiya’ community.⁴⁴ The United Kingdom Home Office advised the following in regards to internal relocation for religious minorities in February 2009: ‘Religious violence in Bangladesh is not state-sponsored, so internal relocation is generally a viable option and applicants in this category could

http://www.odhikar.org/documents/2010/English_Reports/6_monthly_report%20-%20Jan-June_2010.pdf - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 31.

⁴⁰ United States Department of State 2010, '2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices', US State Department website, 11 March, Section 6 www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/sca/136085.htm - Accessed 12 March 2010 – Attachment 8; Human Rights Watch 2010, *World Report 2010 – Bangladesh*, January <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/87391> - Accessed 9 July 2010 – Attachment 32.

⁴¹ ‘Apostasy in Islam’ 2010, Wikipedia, 21 July (last updated) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostasy_in_Islam - Accessed 20 July 2010 – Attachment 33.

⁴² Gomes, W. 2009, ‘The daughter converts to Christianity, Muslims marginalize the family’, *AsiaNews.it*, 22 June <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-daughter-converts-to-Christianity,-Muslims-marginalize-the-family-15579.html> - Accessed 15 July 2010 – Attachment 24.

⁴³ United States Department of State 2010, '2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices', US State Department website, 11 March, Section 2 www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/sca/136085.htm - Accessed 12 March 2010 – Attachment 8.

⁴⁴ DIAC Country Information Service 2007, *Country Information Report No 07/48 - Freedom of movement, internal migration and relocation in Bangladesh*, 10 May (sourced from DFAT advice of 10 May 2007) – Attachment 34.

relocate from areas where they are in the religious minority to safer areas that are not dominated by such violence or where they are in the majority'.⁴⁵ It would appear reasonable to assume that, for a Christian convert to relocate to another area, the religious demography of any new area would need to be considered, such as avoiding relocation to districts where there are no Christians or districts with a history of mistreatment and violence against Christians and Christian converts.

It is also unclear what the consequences of a married woman's conversion would be for her marriage and this may also impact relocation prospects, that is, whether she would relocate as a divorced woman or with her husband and child if they remained together. Sources suggest that generally women's mobility is low in Bangladesh due to their traditional roles and as a result of risk of violence. It would seem that this would be further exacerbated for divorced women. A paper on women in Bangladesh by the Asian Development Bank claims that:

Traditional attitudes towards limiting women's mobility persist throughout Bangladesh. Even though more women are taking up income generating opportunities outside their homes or are participating in public activities, the incidence of trafficking of women and children as well as high levels of harassment of women in public discourage women from moving about freely outside their homes. These fears are often exaggerated by more conservative elements in a community that prefer women and adolescent girls in particular to follow more traditional roles and remain in their homes. Many regions of Bangladesh are still isolated because of a lack of transportation. Road networks are limited and poorly maintained with few vehicles that provide women a safe and secure environment for travel.⁴⁶

A woman's social and economic background would also need to be considered in assessing prospects for relocation. A 2007 paper on women's transport needs in Bangladesh explains that social norms, such as the Islamic practice of *purdah*, also prohibit many women from leaving the home by requiring them to adhere to a strict code that determines when and for what reasons women may wander outside their homes. The practice, which is aimed at secluding women in order to protect their modesty and purity, is common in Bangladesh but that segments of the female upper class live a more mobile lifestyle (normally as a result of education). Therefore key factors affecting the extent to which *purdah* constrains a woman's mobility are her economic and social status and level of education.⁴⁷ In considering internal relocation prospects for victims of domestic violence, the United Kingdom Office also noted that 'factors such as the social and professional background of an individual applicant must be carefully considered when determining relocation as an option.'⁴⁸

5. Deleted.

⁴⁵ UK Home Office 2009, *Operational Guidance Note: Bangladesh*, February, p.10
<http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/policyandlaw/countryspecificasylumpolicyogns/bangladesh.pdf?view=Binary> - Accessed 20 July 2010 – Attachment 35.

⁴⁶ Asian Development Bank 2004, *Bangladesh: Gender, Poverty, and the Millennium Development Goals: Country Gender Strategy*, Asian Development Bank website, p.6
<http://www.adb.org/Documents/Reports/Country-Gender-Assessments/cga-women-bangladesh.pdf> - Accessed 20 July 2010 – Attachment 36.

⁴⁷ Sicat, M. 2007, *Impact of Improved Communication on Women's Transport Needs and Empowerment in Bangladesh*, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, p.72
http://www.unescap.org/ttdw/Publications/TPTS_pubs/bulletin76/chapter5.pdf - Accessed 20 July 2010 – Attachment 37.

⁴⁸ UK Home Office 2009, *Operational Guidance Note: Bangladesh*, February, p.7
<http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/policyandlaw/countryspecificasylumpolicyogns/bangladesh.pdf?view=Binary> - Accessed 20 July 2010 – Attachment 35.

6. Deleted.

List of Attachments

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