



## **Bangladesh: Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 28 March 2011**

### **The treatment of Buddhists in Bangladesh.**

The *US Department of State International Religious Freedom Report* published in November 2010 states:

“There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period, although figures suggested such incidents declined significantly in comparison to the previous reporting period. Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist minorities experienced discrimination and sometimes violence from the Muslim majority. Harassment of Ahmadis continued.” (US Department of state (November 2010) *Bangladesh: International Religious Freedom Report 2010*)

Under the heading Abuses of Religious Freedom the report states:

“According to a report by the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, on February 19, 2010, ethnic Bengali settlers attacked ethnic minorities in Baghaichhari Upazila, beating people and setting fire to approximately 500 minority homesteads and a Buddhist pagoda. At least three people died in the attacks including two members of minorities. Fleeing for their lives more than 500 families, accounting for more than 1,800 people, fled into the forest seeking refuge from further attacks. According to the report security forces were present during the attacks and did nothing to stop the violence. The government investigated these allegations and made some staffing changes to the military command in charge of security for the area during the reporting period.” (ibid)

The *US Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices* published in March 2010 states under the heading Freedom of Religion:

“Discrimination against members of religious minorities, such as Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists, existed 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. The secular AL government, however, appointed some members of the minority communities to senior government and diplomatic positions. In the new cabinet, three of the 38 ministers were non-Muslims.” (US Department of State (11 March 2010) *2009 Human Rights Report: Bangladesh*)

A report from *The Financial Daily* noted:

“Western states and the UN were yesterday accused of ignoring the alleged persecution of indigenous Buddhist minorities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh.

The criticism came at a press conference in Colombo organized by Bangladeshi Buddhist monks and students studying at various universities and Pirivenas in Sri Lanka.

The monks are also holding peaceful rally and a human chain protest this morning (03) at the Vihara Mahadevi Park to highlight what they called a 'dangerous' situation developing in the traditional homeland of Buddhists in Bangladesh.

They called for an immediate halt to the expansion of Bengali Muslim settlements in Buddhist-populated areas in Bangladesh." (The Financial Daily (3 March 2010) *Sri Lanka: UN & West 'ignoring plight of Buddhists in Bangladesh'*)

The report also noted:

"Venerable Dhammade-eparamadipathi Hangarapitiye Maithree Thera told journalists that the western world that rushed to wrongly accuse Sri Lanka of human rights violations had failed to act against fundamentalist attacks on Buddhists in CHT.

He called for urgent action to save the lives of innocent Buddhist people in Chittagong Hill Tracts. These people are just asking for the right to live in peace in their ancestral lands, he added.

Bangladesh Chittagong Hill Bhikku Sangha (Sri Lanka branch) chairman Venerable Devesh Thera and secretary Ven Rashtrapal Thera also addressed the news conference.

They said three Buddhist temples and hundreds of Buddhist houses were burnt in the latest violence from February 19 to 26. Citing Bangladeshi national media, they said at least six Buddhists were killed in last week's "barbaric and heinous" attacks in the CHT." (ibid)

A 2005 query response from the *Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada* states under the heading Treatment of Buddhists:

"Hindus, Christians and Buddhists have traditionally supported opposition political parties, including the Awami League, which lost the 2001 elections (Global IDP Project 25 Feb. 2005, 5). Reported incidents have included rape, looting and burning of homes, and forced evictions (ibid.).

In the northern region of Bangladesh, a militant group by the name of Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) has claimed responsibility for a series of bombings and the killing of Hindus and Buddhists as well as Muslims considered "too lax" (Time Asia 28 Feb. 2005). Human rights activists allege that religious minorities are being driven out of the country through violence by groups wishing to turn Bangladesh into an Islamic state (America 15 Sept. 2003; see also Gulf News 23 Feb. 2003). Members of religious minorities have reportedly fled villages, particularly in the western region of the country, where the Jamaat-e-Islami party has many supporters (Guardian 21 July 2003; Gulf News 23 Feb. 2003).

In August 2003, a number of villages in the Mahalchari area of the Khagrachari District of the Chittagong Hill Tracts were allegedly burnt down by Bengali settlers, leaving two dead, several injured and nearly 1,500 tribal people homeless (AI 1 Mar. 2004; Global IDP Project 25 Feb. 2005; The Independent 25 Sep. 2003). Four Buddhist temples were reportedly damaged and nine women sexually assaulted (AI 1 Mar. 2004; The Independent 25 Sept. 2003).

The Daily Star reported in January 2005 that a growing number of families from the Buddhist Rakhain community of Kuakata in the south of Bangladesh have been forced from their land in the last three years by a group of influential Bengalis (4 Jan. 2005). Some of the families have moved to Cox' Bazar and Bandaran, and others still have returned to Arakan state in neighbouring Myanmar (Daily Star 4 Jan. 2005). Some Rakhains told The Daily Star that their community has experienced increased harassment since 2001 (ibid.)." ((Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (16 August 2005) *Bangladesh: Situation of Buddhists, particularly in the areas of Chittagong and Dhaka; treatment by Muslim majority, Islamist groups, authorities and political parties; protection available (2003-2005) BGD100462.E* )

Under the heading State Protection the report states:

"Government officials have argued that "Bangladesh is a picture of communal harmony" (Economist 29 Nov. 2003; see also U.S. 30 Apr. 2004). During a meeting with members of the Buddhist community, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia maintained that all Bangladeshis have the same rights, regardless of their faith (The Independent 24 May 2005). At the same meeting, Zia acknowledged that a segment of Bangladeshi society was inciting "hatred among people of various regions, religions and political beliefs" (The Independent 24 May 2005). However, up until recently, her government had insisted that Islamic fundamentalists were not present in the country (Economist 18 June 2005; Time Asia 28 Feb. 2005). Still, in response to suggestions in the media that militancy and violence were on the rise, the police arrested several suspected militants and banned JMJB (ibid.) in a "half-hearted effort to eradicate it" (Economist 18 June 2005). The Awami League argues that the ruling party, the BNP, is "turn[ing] a blind eye to violence by Islamic extremists" (Economist 18 June 2005) and may not be able to control "extremism" as a result of the party's ruling alliance with fundamentalist parties (Time Asia 28 Feb. 2005).

In August 2004, six people who had been accused in the murder of a Buddhist monk in Raozan in 2002 were sentenced to death by the First Additional District and Sessions Judge Court (Law and Our Rights 5 Sept. 2004). As at 5 September 2004, the sentence was pending approval of the High Court (ibid.). Gyanojyoti Mohathero was killed on 21 April 2002 at a monastery in Raozan (ibid.). "(ibid)

A report by the *Asian Centre for Human Rights (India)* under the heading 'Violations of the rights of religious minorities' page 42 it states:

"On 12 September 2007, Md. Abdul Matin, the Sub-District Executive Officer of Mahalchari in Khagrachari district issued a public notice to prohibit "construction of new Mosque, Hindu temple and Buddhist temple" in Mahalchari sub-division without prior permission of the authorities concerned.

The order was not targeted against the Muslims or Hindus but against indigenous Buddhists. “ (Asian Centre for Human Rights (India) (1 August 2008) *South Asia Human Rights Index - 2008 (Bangladesh)*)

It also states under the heading ‘Buddhists’ on page 43:

“Religious persecution was common in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Buddhist monks were often harassed, assaulted and Buddhist temples were attacked.

On 10 January 2007, a group of army personnel harassed Rev. Sharadhatissyo Bhikkhu, the chief priest of Aryo Mitra Bouddha Vihara in Lakshimichari in Khagrachari district. The army personnel surrounded the Buddhist temple and interrogated Rev. Sharadhatissyo Bhikkhu about another Buddhist monk Rev. Nanda Bhikkhu who had earlier in the day delivered a religious sermon at the temple premises” (ibid)

It also states:

“On 17 July 2007, a group of army personnel from Shuknachari army camp raided a Buddhist meditation centre "Bhujuli Bhavana Kendra" situated on remote Bhujulichuk hill-top in Lakshimichari sub district in Khagrachari district. They arrested two Buddhist sramans (novices) identified as Shashan Ujjal Sraman (22) and Nykishtic Sraman (26). The army later released them after noting down their personal information and photographing them.”(ibid)

A report by the *Indo-Asian News Service* under the heading ‘Bangladesh's Buddhist tribals seek Hasina's intervention’ states:

“Dhaka, Feb. 22 -- Bangladesh's Buddhist tribals Monday sought direct intervention of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina alleging that killing of five people and the burning of their homes and four prayer houses by Muslim settlers in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) was backed by the army.

The charges were levelled at a rally in Rangamati, headquarters of the southeastern district that is home to the indigenous people, and a memorandum to the prime minister was submitted through Rangamati's deputy commissioner.

Demanding action against the commander of the army force stationed in the district, the tribals demanded that police replace army personnel.” (Indo-Asian News Service (22<sup>nd</sup> February 2010) *Bangladesh's Buddhist tribals seek Hasina's intervention*)

It also states:

“The Bangladesh government has said it will reconstruct the four prayer houses set ablaze during two days of violence against Buddhist tribals in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

Dipankar Talukdar, the minister in charge of the region, said this would be done "as soon as possible".

He also promised action against those responsible within seven days.

At least four prayer houses were burnt down, allegedly by Muslim settlers, in Gangaram Mukh area and nearby villages under Baghaichhari upazila (sub-district) in Rangamati during Saturday's arson attack, the website of The Daily Star said.

A mosque and a church at Gangaram Mukh, a Buddhist temple at Maitreepur and another in 'guccha gram' (cluster of villages) under Baghaichhari upazila in the district were set on fire.

CHT has witnessed recurring violence between the locals and the Muslim Bengali-speaking people settled as part of the policy of successive governments to control the turbulent area."(ibid)

Quoting various sources the *UK Home Office* report on Bangladesh states:

"The 1991 Census showed that there were then 623,000 Buddhists in Bangladesh, of whom 575,000 were living in the Division of Chittagong. [43b] According to an estimate quoted by BuddhaNet, the Australian-based website of the Buddha Dharma Education Association, there were about one million Buddhists in Bangladesh by 2004, living mainly in the area of the city of Chittagong, the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Comilla, Noakhali, Cox's Bazar and in Barisal. The Buddhists of Bangladesh belong to four groups of nations who have been gradually mixed together; the groups are the Austic, the Tibeto-Burman, the Dravilians and the Aryans. According to historians the Tibeto-Burman consists of three tribes – the Pyu, the Kanyan and the Thet (Chakma). The Chakma tribes primarily reside in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Kanyan tribe is known as the Rakhine (Arakanese) group who still live in the South-Eastern part of Chittagong district. The plain Buddhists of Bangladesh, known as the Burua-Buddhist, are the ancient peoples of Bangladesh who have lived there for five thousand years, according to Arakanese chronology." (UK Border Agency (Home Office) (20 August 2010) *Bangladesh: Country of Origin Information Report; Bangladesh*)

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre 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 read in full all documents referred to.

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