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Some 500 Christians go on a hunger strike over seized Church land

An historic pond owned by the St Peter's Church since 1849 is the bone of contention. Initially used for baptisms, it now serves the community as an important source of drinking water. The government wants to fill it in to build a courthouse. For years, the Christian minority has endured forced evictions.

AsiaNews.it (12.01.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1nkFpge> - More than 500 Christians, mostly Protestants, held a protest on Sunday in front of Ashwini Kumar Hall in Barisal, south-central Bangladesh. The demonstration over an historic Church-owned pond saw participants take part in a hunger strike (pictured).

"We organised the demonstration to protest against the government's decision to construct a building that would fill the pond," Fr Shanti Mondal, representative of the Church of Bangladesh, told AsiaNews.

The peaceful protest was held on Sunday in front of Ashwini Kumar Hall in Barisal. Several Catholic priests and representatives of various religions were among the demonstrators.

Fr Mondal noted that the pond has belonged to St Peter's Church since 1849. Initially used for baptisms, it now serves the community as an important source of drinking water.

"This is an historic pond, but local lawyers want to replace it with a ten-storey building. The government has taken this decision even though we have all the legal documents, and regularly pay taxes on the land."

Protesters formed a human chain and marched through the city, shouting slogans against land seizures. Afterwards, they presented a memorandum to the Deputy Commissioner.

"The Public Works Department filled in a 150-year pond to build the Judicial Magistrate Court in Barisal," the Christian leader said. "The action is completely illegal."

"Please, do not offend our religious sentiments," he pleaded.

For years, Bangladesh's Christian minority has been subjected to forced land seizures, most of which are carried out with various forms of violence.

Just a few days ago, a Catholic tribal man was torched to death probably in connection with a land feud.

ISKCON calls on Bangladesh government to protect religious minorities

ISKCON.org (12.12.2015) – On 10th December two people were injured when attackers threw crude bombs and fired gun shots at a religious gathering of over two thousand devotees at the temple of International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in Kaharol region of Dinajpur in Bangladesh.

"Luckily, the bombs did not explode," said ISKCON general secretary of Bangladesh Caru Candra Dasa who was present at the place of incident, "however, the attackers opened fire at the entrance, injuring two people."

Quoting witnesses, Monsur Ali Sarker, officer-in-charge of Kaharol Police Station, said five men on two motorbikes went to Bahuchi and hurled the bomb, which did not explode but triggered a hue and cry.

The criminals then exploded two crude bombs to make way for their escape, the officer said. However, locals caught one of them -- Safayet Hossain -- in possession of a crude bomb.

This attack on the followers of Hinduism is fourth such incident in a span of one month which has seen gun and bomb attacks in various parts of Bangladesh.

On Friday the devotees of ISKCON formed took out peaceful marches across Bangladesh to bring their plight to the attention of the government and the world. ISKCON has more than 40 temples and 50,000 followers in the country.

Though the investigations are underway, this incident underlines the dire situation of human rights & religious freedom in Bangladesh. As per the Bangladesh state census, the Hindu population which stood at 18.5% in 1961 had drastically come down to 8.5% by 2011.

As per the documents presented in April this year at the US Congressional Hearing on Religious Extremism in Bangladesh, the document stated that within the broader Hindu community *"more than 47 temples destroyed and approximately 700-1500 homes vandalized or burned to the ground (estimates vary) at the beginning of 2013. In the aftermath of the violence, Amnesty International noted with concern that the Hindu community in Bangladesh was at extreme risk. The Hindu minority was similarly in the runup to and during elections in early 2014, when an estimated 495 Hindu homes were damaged, 585 shops were attacked or looted, and 169 temples were vandalised according to the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council."*

"This year alone marked several attacks in Bangladesh against temples, congregational gatherings and individuals simply due to their religious beliefs. We appeal to the Government of Bangladesh to address the growing intolerance towards minority communities and to safeguard the fundamental right of religious freedom for all as

specified in the country's constitution." said Anuttama Dasa, Global Minister of Communications for ISKCON.

Over the coming days, devotees and friends of ISKCON, Hindu community leaders, human rights activists and other officials are expected to lead delegations to their local Bangladeshi Embassies to voice concerns about the human rights & religious freedom in Bangladesh.

Dhaka, brutal attack on Catholic brothers leaves them fighting for life

AsiaNews.it (10.12.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1MgxRJx> - Today, two Catholic brothers were seriously injured in the capital of Bangladesh. Rajesh D 'Cruze, a banker, and Ranjan D' Cruze, an employee in a private company are currently being treated in Dhaka Medical College Hospital but their conditions are described as grave.

Nirmal Rozario, general secretary of the Bangladesh Christian Association (BCA), told AsiaNews: "We unreservedly condemn this heinous attack and demand immediate action against the culprits."

The dynamics of the attack is not yet clear, but closely resemble the attempted murder of Fr. Piero Parolari, the PIME missionary priest (Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions) attacked in recent weeks by still unidentified criminals. The two Catholics were in Arjotpara, in the Mohakhli, one of the most crowded areas of the capital home to offices, shops and institutional sites.

According to preliminary reports, they were approached at about 12 (local time) by more than five assailants, who savagely attacked them with guns and knives.

Some Christian leaders have visited them in the hospital and expressed total condemnation. Rozario adds: "Their health condition is critical. Please pray for them. "

The secretary of BCA reports that "this year there have been numerous incidents of violence against Christians. We want a just punishment for those who committed this crime. We also urge the government to ensure justice and security for all ".

In recent weeks several Christians have been threatened with death in a series of letters and text messages to targets, "guilty" of being foreign or "preachers of the Gospel in Bangladesh". The threats say the intended victims should "eat until they can", because soon they "will be killed."

Catholic sources tell AsiaNews that the tension is due to a power struggle going on between the ruling party and the opposition forces, particularly Islamic radicals. The country is governed by the Bangladesh Awami League [secular nationalist party - ed] led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Since being re-elected to lead the country in January 2014, Hasina is trying to boost economic growth and encourage a secular, democratic society. At the same time, several members of her party are under investigation for crimes of corruption and abuse of office.

Analysts also point to the attempt to marginalize the opposition, both the Bangladesh Nationalist Party that the most radical Islamic group, the Jamaat-e-Islami.

Recently, the Supreme Court upheld the death sentence for a high profile member of the opposition, accused of committing war crimes during the Indo-Pakistani conflict in 1971. The government supporters took to the streets to celebrate the verdict, but the opposition objected to the "political motives" for the execution.

Gunmen open fire on Shia mosque in Bangladesh

Catholic bishops condemn second attack in just over a month

UCAnews.com (27.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1IjPI74> - At least one person was killed and three wounded when gunmen opened fire on a Shia mosque in northern Bangladesh on Nov. 26.

It was the second deadly attack on Bangladesh's minority Shia community in just over a month.

Five gunmen entered the Al Mustafa mosque in Bogra district while about 20 worshippers were at evening prayer. They opened fire after locking the main gate, local media reported, quoting eyewitnesses.

The Bangladesh Imamia Welfare Foundation, a local Islamic charity that receives funding from Shia-majority Iran, runs the mosque.

"We don't know the identity of the attackers who fled after the shooting. Security has been beefed up in the area and the situation is calm now," Bogra police chief Mohammad Asaduzzaman said.

Two people were detained in connection with the attack and were being questioned, he said, without giving further details.

The so-called Islamic State group later claimed responsibility for the attack, according to the U.S.-based SITE Intelligence group, which monitors jihadist activities online.

The attack in Bogra follows an Oct. 24 grenade attack on a Shia gathering in Dhaka, which left two dead and dozens injured.

The Islamic State group also claimed responsibility for that attack.

The Shia community has been living in fear since last month's attack, a Shia leader said Nov. 27.

"We feared last month's attack might be repeated and our fears have come true. Surely, there is an international conspiracy behind these attacks," said Habib Reza, an official from Hussaini Dalan, the main Shia shrine in Dhaka and the scene of last month's bombing.

"The government must ensure security for all minorities including Shias and find out and punish the attackers strictly," he said.

"Those who carried out these attacks are animals in human disguise, far away from human values. They are terrorists using Islam and they must be stopped."

The Catholic Church condemned the Nov. 26 attacks.

"This is not right. No one can accept violence in the name of religion," said Bishop Gervas Rozario of Rajshahi, whose diocese covers Bogra district.

Once considered a moderate Muslim-majority nation, Bangladesh has seen a rise in religious violence in recent times.

Four secular bloggers and a publisher were murdered and three more injured in machete attacks by alleged Islamic extremists this year.

Meanwhile, an Italian aid worker and a Japanese man were shot dead, while a Protestant pastor and an Italian Catholic priest narrowly escaped death, also this year.

Al-Qaida claimed responsibility for the attacks on the bloggers, while the Islamic State group has taken credit for the attacks on foreigners.

The Bangladeshi government has repeatedly denied the presence of international terrorist groups and has linked the attacks to local militant outfits allegedly affiliated with opposition parties.

Italian priest shot in northern Bangladesh

Third recent attack on foreigners comes amid dispute over Islamic State links

UCAnews.com (18.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1IjPtZN> - Assailants shot a Catholic priest in northern Bangladesh on Nov. 18, in the third recent attack on foreigners in this Muslim-majority country.

Father Parolari Piero, 64, from the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, was shot several times by three attackers in Dinajpur town as he was riding a bicycle. He was treated at a local hospital following the attack.

Father Piero, a doctor, has lived and worked in Dinajpur for more than 30 years. Currently, he serves at church-run St. Vincent Hospital and is an assistant parish priest at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church.

"He was on his way to the hospital from his residence when unknown attackers shot him in the back," said Father Bidya Paul Bormon, a local priest who lives in the same town.

Local people rushed Father Piero to Dinajpur Medical College Hospital, where he underwent surgery. Doctors said he might be sent to the capital, Dhaka, for further treatment.

"He sustained injuries to the neck and head, but he is better now. It will take about two days to determine if he is out of danger or not," said Dr. Kanta Roy, vice principal at the hospital.

Bishop Sebastian Tudu of Dinajpur condemned the attack.

"There are a good number of foreign missionaries working in Dinajpur and the government has been providing police security for them in the churches. Yet, this priest was shot and injured," said Bishop Tudu.

There were no immediate claims of responsibility for Father Piero's shooting.

But the attack on the priest follows the murder of Italian aid worker Cesare Tabella on Sept. 28 in Dhaka, and the fatal shooting of a Japanese man on Oct. 3 in northern Rangpur district.

In both these cases, the Islamic State militant group claimed responsibility for the killings, according to the U.K.-based Site Intelligence Group, which monitors global jihadist activities online. However, Bangladesh Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan has dismissed the alleged Islamic State link to either killing.

Since then, a Bangladeshi Protestant pastor narrowly escaped death after three Islamic militants from banned local militant outfit Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh tried to slit his throat in Pabna district in northwestern Bangladesh on Oct 5.

Protestant pastor escapes murder attempt in Bangladesh

Government urged to ensure the safety of churches and Christian leaders

UCAnews.com (06.10.2015) - <http://www.ucanews.com/news/protestant-pastor-escapes-murder-attempt-in-bangladesh/74390> - A Protestant pastor in northwestern Bangladesh was wounded and narrowly escaped a murder attempt, which a Catholic lay leader alleges was made by Muslim fundamentalists.

Three men on Oct. 5 attacked Pastor Luke Sarkar of the Faith Bible Church at Ishwardi in Pabna district, with knives at his residence. He sustained injuries to the throat. The attackers fled as people in the vicinity responded to the pastor's cries for help.

The attack on the 50-year-old pastor comes amid an atmosphere of tension and fear in the country following the murder of an Italian aid worker in Dhaka on Sept. 28 and a Japanese man in northern Rangpur district on Oct 3. The jihadist Islamic State group allegedly has claimed responsibility for the killings of the foreigners.

The attackers entered Sarkar's home pretending to be candidates for Christian conversion.

"I don't know details about their identity ... They expressed interest in Christianity and wanted to convert," Sarkar told ucanews.com.

"As the conversation proceeded, my wife moved to another room. Suddenly, one of them pressed my mouth and the other two tried to slit my throat. As I started screaming, people gathered around and they fled quickly," Sarkar said.

"I have been preaching the Gospel for five years but never been threatened or attacked," he added.

Local police officials say a case has been filed and one person has been detained for questioning.

"We are investigating the case seriously given the current circumstances over alleged militant attacks on foreigners," said Biman Kumar Das, officer-in-charge at Ishwardi police station.

The attack on Sarkar might be an act of militancy, says Nirmol Rozario, secretary of the Bangladesh Christian Association.

"The killing of foreigners and the attack on the pastor might be connected and a retaliatory act in response to Western attacks on [the Islamic State group]," said Rozario, a Catholic.

"We appeal to the government to ensure the safety of churches and Christian religious leaders," he said.

Rozario said his association would organize a protest rally in Dhaka to condemn the attack and demand justice.

Islam dominates in Bangladesh, with Muslims comprising about 90 percent of the country's 160 million people.

The country, which has the fourth largest Muslim population, has had security issues for non-Muslims ever since the country's Supreme Court rejected a petition challenging the legality of a constitutional provision recognizing Islam as the state religion.

Since then, there have been incidents of looting of churches and violence against Christian men and women as well as a spate of murders of atheist bloggers, suggesting inroads by Muslim fundamentalists in the country.

Bangladesh urged to tackle religious intolerance

Christians and minorities fear rise in extremism, UN watchdog says



Heiner Bielefeldt, the U.N. special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, speaks during a press conference in Dhaka on Sept. 9 (Photo by Rock Ronald Rozario)

UCAnews.com (14.09.2015) - <http://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladesh-urged-to-tackle-religious-intolerance/74243> - The politicization of religion and a rise in intolerance threaten Bangladesh's long tradition of pluralism and interreligious harmony, according to a United Nations rights watchdog.

Heiner Bielefeldt, the U.N. special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, said religion extremism is instilling a climate of fear among Bangladesh's ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians.

In an interview with ucanews.com on Sept. 9, following a 10-day visit to the country, Bielefeldt said authorities are not doing enough to find justice for victims of violence targeting ethnic and religious minorities.

"There are allegations of attack, murder and rape of indigenous people, but they are not often efficiently investigated," Bielefeldt said. "So religious and ethnic minorities in Bangladesh live in a climate of physical and legal insecurity."

He cited an example of the 2012 attacks on Buddhist temples in Ramu, in Cox's Bazar in the country's southeast. Authorities helped repair places of worship after the violence, Bielefeldt said, yet perpetrators have not been punished.

As part of his visit, Bielefeldt met with government officials, parliamentarians, human rights activists, civil society organizations, indigenous leaders and religious organizations, including members of the Christian community.

Bielefeldt said Christian leaders he met with told him of their fears of a rise in Islamic extremism.

"There are incidents of looting of churches and violence against Christian men and women. Other people might see these just as sporadic incidents, but from minorities' perspectives, it is seen in a broader context," Bielefeldt said. "Often, these are not taken seriously. So, the fear is there."

He also praised Christians for initiating interreligious dialogue programs that seek to bring together representatives from majority and minority religious groups.

Islam dominates in Bangladesh, with Muslims comprising about 90 percent of the country's 160 million people. Hindus represent about 8 percent, while Christians and Buddhists represent only a small percentage of the population.

"Religious extremism is a global phenomenon," he said. "It is not only happening in the name of Islam, but also in the name of Buddhism in Myanmar, in the name of Hinduism in India, and also in the name of Christianity in Russia."

Losing trust

Bielefeldt's visit to Bangladesh comes amid worrying trends for religious minorities in Bangladesh.

The issue of secularism has recently been in the public spotlight, after the country's Supreme Court rejected a petition challenging the legality of a constitutional provision recognizing Islam as Bangladesh's state religion.

Speaking with reporters Sept. 9, Bielefeldt said the government has publicly committed to defending the constitutional principle of secularism. But in practice, there are "inconsistencies" in how this is implemented.

He said the influence of extremists has triggered "the politicization of religion" and contributed to a shrinking space in the country for religious minorities and secularism.

He cited the high-profile murders of several secular bloggers this year.

"The government condemned the recent murders of online activists but did little to protect them," Bielefeldt said. "Some officials publicly admonished them for expressing critical views on religion, particularly Islam ... thereby, sending ambiguous messages to society."

He also cited a controversial law that calls for punishments for people judged to have published material to deliberately hurt people's religious feelings.

"This law undoubtedly has a chilling effect on civil society organizations, human rights activists and members of religious minority communities," he said, adding that the law "contributes to the perception of a shrinking space for frank public discourse".

While there may be troubling signs for religious freedoms in Bangladesh, Bielefeldt said there are also solutions.

"Extremism rises when there is endemic poverty, unemployment and corruption prevail, and people lose their trust in public institutions," Bielefeldt told ucanews.com. "If Bangladesh wants to check extremism, it must tackle all these contributing factors."

See Preliminary findings of Country Visit to Bangladesh by Heiner Bielefeldt, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16399&LangID=E>

Second blogger hacked to death in Bangladesh

Reuters (30.03.2015) - A blogger was hacked to death by assailants using machetes in the Bangladesh capital Dhaka on Monday, the second attack in five weeks on a critic of religious extremism in the Muslim-majority nation.

Washikur Rahman, a blogger advocating secularism, was attacked by young religious students on a busy street in the center of Dhaka on Monday morning, a police official said.

"Police on duty near the spot caught two attackers with three machetes as they were fleeing the scene after the incident," police official Humayan Kabir told Reuters.

In recent years, religious militants in Bangladesh have targeted secularist writers while the government has tried to crack down on hardline Islamist groups seeking to make it a Sharia-based state.

Last month U.S.-based blogger Avijit Roy, another secularist, was hacked to death while returning with his wife from a book fair in Dhaka. His wife, Rafida Bonya Ahmed, suffered head injuries and lost a finger.

Bangladesh's government and main opposition have been locked for months in a standoff that has created a sense of deepening insecurity.

"The horrifying murder of a blogger this morning... must be a 'wake up call' to the authorities on the need to create a safe environment for journalists and activists to express their views," Amnesty International said in a statement on Monday.

Blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider was killed in 2013 near his home in Dhaka after he led a protest demanding capital punishment for Islamist leaders convicted of war crimes during Bangladesh's war for independence.

In 2004, Humayun Azad, a secular writer and professor at Dhaka University, was attacked by militants while returning home from a Dhaka book fair. He died in [Germany](#) while undergoing treatment.

Roy's wife, Ahmed, blamed her husband's murder in February on religious fanatics, and accused police on duty of not doing enough to stop the attack.

Mohammad Habibur Rahman, secretary of the Bangladesh Police Association and Superintendent of Police of Dhaka, said the police had been unfairly criticized.

"There are plenty of examples where our police force come forward to save people, risking their own lives," he said.

Media group Reporters Without Borders ranked Bangladesh 146th among 180 countries for press freedom last year.

American atheist blogger hacked to death in Bangladesh

The Guardian (27.02.2015) <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/27/american-atheist-blogger-hacked-to-death-in-bangladesh> - Protests in Dhaka after Avijit Roy, whose blog championed liberal secular writing in the Muslim-majority nation, was attacked along with his wife

A prominent American blogger of Bangladeshi origin has been hacked to death with machetes by unidentified assailants in Dhaka, after he allegedly received threats from Islamists.

The body of Avijit Roy, founder of the Mukto-Mona (Free-mind) blog site – which champions liberal secular writing in the Muslim-majority nation – was found covered in blood after an attack that also left his wife critically wounded.

"He died as he was brought to the hospital. His wife was also seriously wounded. She has lost a finger," local police chief Sirajul Islam said.

The couple were on a bicycle rickshaw, returning from a book fair, when two assailants stopped and dragged them on to the pavement before striking them with machetes, local media reported, citing witnesses.

Hundreds of protesters rallied in Dhaka to denounce the murder, chanting slogans including "we want justice" and "raise your voice against militants".

Imran Sarker, the head of the [Bangladesh](#) bloggers' association, said the protests would continue until those responsible were apprehended. "Avijit's killing once again proved that there is a culture of impunity in the country," Sarker told Agence France-Presse. "The government must arrest the killers in 24 hours or face non-stop protests."

Roy, who was 42, is the second Bangladeshi blogger to have been murdered in two years and the fourth writer to have been attacked since 2004.

Hardline Islamist groups have long demanded the public killing of atheist bloggers and sought new laws to deal with writing critical of Islam.

"Roy suffered fatal wounds in the head and died from bleeding ... after being brought to the hospital," Dr Sohel Ahmed told reporters.

Police have launched an inquiry and recovered the machetes used in the attack but could not confirm whether Islamists were behind the incident.

But Roy's father said the writer, a US citizen, had received a number of "threatening" emails and messages on social media from hardliners unhappy with his writing. "He was a secular humanist and has written about 10 books," Ajoy Roy told AFP. His most famous work was Biswisher Virus (Virus of Faith).

The Center for Inquiry, a US-based charity promoting free thought, said it was "shocked and heartbroken" by the brutal murder. "Dr Roy was a true ally, a courageous and eloquent defender of reason, science, and free expression, in a country where those values have been under heavy attack," it said in a statement.

Roy's killing also triggered strong condemnation from his fellow writers and publishers, who lamented the growing religious conservatism and intolerance in Bangladesh.

"The attack on Roy and his wife, Rafida Ahmed, is outrageous. We strongly protest this attack and are deeply concerned about the safety of writers," said Sarker.

Pinaki Bhattacharya, a fellow blogger and friend of Roy, claimed one of the country's largest online book retailers was being openly threatened for selling Roy's books.

"In Bangladesh the easiest target is an atheist. An atheist can be attacked and murdered," he wrote on Facebook.

Atheist blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider was hacked to death in 2013 by members of a little-known Islamist militant group, triggering nationwide protests by tens of thousands of secular activists.

"The pattern of the killing appeared to be the same as that of previous attack on a celebrated writer," said Shiblee Noman, assistant commissioner of Dhaka police. "It seems it was carried out by a reactionary fundamentalist group."

After Haider's death, Bangladesh's hardline Islamist groups started to protest against other campaigning bloggers, calling a series of nationwide strikes to demand their deaths, accusing them of blasphemy.

The secular government of the Bangladeshi prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, reacted by arresting some atheist bloggers.

The government also blocked about a dozen websites and blogs to stem the furore over blasphemy, as well as stepping up security for the bloggers.

On Friday Sarker said: "Communal and militant groups have threatened the very spirit of our nation. Yet instead of crushing them, the government was keen on appeasing them by arresting secular bloggers."

Noman said police were investigating a tweet by the pro-Islamist group Ansar Bangla Seven that appeared to celebrate Roy's murder.

"Target Down here in Bangladesh," the group tweeted from the @AnsarBn7 handle.

The US embassy to Bangladesh offered its condolences to Roy's family and said it was providing consular assistance. Roy's wife, who is also a blogger, was moved to a clinic for further treatment on Friday.

Bangladesh is the world's fourth-largest Muslim majority nation with Muslims making up some 90 per cent of the country's 160 million people.

A tribunal has recently handed down a series of verdicts against leading Islamists and others for crimes committed during the war of independence from Pakistan in 1971.

Christian proselytizing raises tensions in Bangladesh

Secularism faces a significant challenge as the 'conversion business' booms

UCA News (05.02.2015) <http://www.ucanews.com/news/christian-proselytizing-raises-tensions-in-bangladesh/72930> - It has been almost four months since Protestant pastors Ariful Mondol and Mousumi Mondol were arrested for illegally proselytizing among Muslim villagers in Bangladesh's northwestern Lalmonirhat district. While the married couple was later released on bail, the case — still ongoing — has taken its toll on Banbhasa village.

Across Bangladesh, clashes over conversion have loomed large. In Lalmonirhat, the first case yet to surface has seen rising tensions and fissures among neighbors.

"I myself have studied in a Church school and most Muslims revere Christians in this area. Now, people are upset over the incident and they are saying bad words against Christians," said Shaon Firoz, 33, a local leader of the ruling Awami League party.

On November 9 last year, the pastors were arrested while holding a secret mass conversion.

"They attempted to convert a group of 40 Muslim villagers secretly and it made other villagers angry," said Mahfuzur Rahman, officer in-charge at Banbhasa police station in Lalmonirhat district.

The trial is ongoing and the next hearing will be held this month. If found guilty, the pastors from the fringe Church of God could face up to two years imprisonment for violating the country's religious freedom law.

Though Islam is officially the state religion, Bangladesh's constitution established the country as a secular state. The charter also protects the right to profess, practice and propagate any religion freely, but bans proselytism.

The pastors have denied any wrongdoing and defended their right to freedom of religion.

"My husband and I came to this area nine months ago and we have converted some people who wanted to become Christians, but none of them have been lured with money or other rewards," said Mousumi Mondol, 30.

Mondol alleged that a local imam who doesn't like Christians filed a case against them and provoked local Muslims with a "fabricated lured conversion" story.

The imam refused to meet and talk with ucanews.com, but an aide said the pastors should leave the area immediately or face "dire consequences".

While the case is running in court, the Muslims who wanted to convert to Christianity have backtracked fearing a backlash from fellow Muslims, according to Rahman.

The story of "lured conversion" has stuck and throughout Banbhasa village, local Muslims have expressed anger over the incident.

"I felt so angry when I heard they wanted to convert 40 Muslims for money. If police hadn't come and arrested them, people would have beaten them up," said Shafiqul Islam, 45, a Muslim who runs a tea stall in the village.

"If Muslims want to become Christians we have no problem, but we are angry because they have been lured with money and property. They will burn in hell for their sins," he added.

The Awami League party leader Firoz said some Muslim parents are considering pulling their children from the local Church school fearing they might be "entrapped for conversion".

One villager, who converted to Christianity a few months ago and spoke on the condition of anonymity, defended his decision saying he was attracted to the teachings of the Bible.

"I know Muslims say bad words about me and my family because we have left Islam to become Christians. We are happy to be Christians but now we are concerned for our safety after the recent incident," he said.

The incident in Lalmonirhat is unprecedented, but similar cases have happened across rural Bangladesh.

In the Keshobpur area of southern Jessore district, there has been a series of conversions of Muslim villagers by dozens of Protestant groups in recent years.

Rafiq Bhuiyan, 30 who converted in 2008 and became a member of the House Church of Bangladesh, admitted conversion had become something of a business for fringe Christian groups. He has since been fired from his job for reasons he claimed were nepotistic.

"I converted to Christianity with my family because they rewarded me with a house and a job in the Church. Officially all my family members are still Muslims because we have kept our Islamic names in all government documents," Bhuiyan said.

Rafiq said he previously worked for a pastor for the Church. For his part, he has helped convert about 300 people.

"In Keshobpur, about 700 Muslims became Christians in the past three years thanks to various Protestant groups. Many of them were baptized several times. The more numbers they can show, the more money they can get from foreign donors," he said.

John Jipu Roy, head of the House Church of Bangladesh, denied such claims saying Rafiq was spreading false information. But interviews with locals back his accounts of the "conversion business".

Selina Akter, 40, said she has been baptized four times and each time she received 500 taka (US\$6.40), traveling allowances and lunch.

"Every time they take our photos and sometimes foreign donors also take part in conversion programs and photo sessions," she said.

Jiten Sarker, 40, has been baptized six times but he is a member of no specific church.

"I have no problem with baptism because I get 1,000-1,500 taka each time. If I can bring in people for conversion, I can make even more money," he said.

In Keshobpur, there are 30 Christian churches and almost all are involved in the "conversion business" for money, said Gabriel Biswas, secretary of the Keshobpur unit of the Bangladesh Christian Association, a national rights forum of Christians in Bangladesh.

"Here, we have 30 churches but the number of Christian families is less than 100. People who become Christians for money go back to their own religion within a month or two," he said.

Police say unless there is violence over conversions there is nothing to worry about.

"We have not yet received any written complaints over the conversions but we have heard people are being lured with money and valuables to convert," said Mohammad Abdul Jalil, officer in-charge at Keshobpur police station.

Sayedul Islam, imam of a local mosque, said area Muslims have no problem with conversion as it is almost always temporary.

"We have seen for years that most Muslims convert back to Islam soon after. Those who don't come back we declare them 'outcast' from society, but their number is very few," he said.

Of Bangladesh's 160 million people about 90 percent are Muslims, eight percent are Hindu and the rest belong to other religions including Buddhism and Christianity. They are about 600,000 Christians in the country including about 350,000 Catholics. There are approximately 200 Protestant churches of all sizes.

Generally, Christians in Bangladesh are highly regarded by the population at large for their significant contributions in the fields of education, health and development, and services to people — mainly to the poor, the underprivileged and helpless.

Christian missionaries contributed immensely to Bengali language and literature as they promoted a more colloquial and simplified form of the language instead of using its highly sophisticated form.

However, some Christian leaders warn that Protestant groups engaging in the "conversion business" are tarnishing the image of the religion.

"Bangladesh's constitution guarantees freedom of religion but we should consider the reality before we can evangelize and convert. This is a Muslim-majority country and we

all might face problems if anyone hurts the religious sentiments of Muslims,” said Nirmol Rozario, a Catholic and secretary-general of the Bangladesh Christian Association.

Government officials say luring people to convert is a punishable criminal offense.

“We have heard some people are being tempted with money and other incentives to convert, in some cases punishments have been handed down,” said Hasan Jahangir Alam, a joint secretary with the Religious Affairs Ministry.

“This is a secular nation, but the government will take steps against tempting conversion before things get worse,” he said.
