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Catholic priest missing as Pope Francis arrives

World Watch Monitor (30.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2B4Dbp9> - Pope Francis has arrived in Bangladesh, where a Catholic priest disappeared three days ago, highlighting the pressure Christians and other minority groups are under in the mainly Muslim country.

Father Walter William Rozario, who is also the headmaster of a high school, went missing in northern Natore district on 27 November, on his way home from Bonpara, the village where a Catholic shopkeeper was hacked to death in June. Bonpara is home to one of the oldest Christian communities in the country.

Earlier this month, the police charged 12 militants with the shopkeeper's murder. The Islamic State group had claimed responsibility for the murder, saying it was "part of its operations" in Bangladesh, though the government has repeatedly insisted IS has no presence there.

Police say they are investigating whether Fr. Rozario, who lives in Borni, 300km east of Bonpara, was abducted by Islamists. The lead priest at Fr. Rosario's church, Father Subroto Purification, told AsiaNews he had received a phone call with a ransom request of 300,000 Taka (more than US\$ 3,500). A report from The Hindu said a call had been made to the family from the priest's phone, but that the police believed it was a hoax.

Fr. Rosario, 41, had been in Bonpara to help prepare for the ordination of two local deacons by Pope Francis in Dhaka on Friday (1 December), UCA News reported.

The priest's disappearance has instilled fear in the parishioners, who say they no longer feel safe to attend events connected to the Pope's visit.

Pope 'talking to Bangladesh's soul'

Christians and Hindus account for less than 10 per cent of Bangladesh's population of 160 million. Of the total population, Catholics comprise just 0.2 per cent, approximately 250,000 people – an even smaller number than in Myanmar, where there are around 600,000, according to the BBC.

The pontiff's message, however, will be for the whole nation, Cardinal Patrick D'Rozario of Dhaka told journalists earlier.

"[He] is coming to talk to the soul of Bangladesh ... prioritising reconciliation, forgiveness and peace," the Cardinal said.

In his speech today (30 November) Pope Francis said: "The most holy name of God can never be invoked to justify hatred and violence against our fellow human beings."

The Pope will also meet with 500 Islamic leaders tomorrow (1 December), who will deliver a letter to him containing a "fatwa against extremism signed by 100,000 imams", senior Muslim cleric Allamma Majharul Islam told AsiaNews.

The cleric, who is also a consultant to the Minister of the Interior and responsible for curbing the use of hate speech by imams, said fundamentalism in Bangladesh was "rooted in an incorrect education". He emphasised that there was a need to teach students the "true teachings of Islam", to "tell them there is no place for weapons or attacks on other believers".

Image threatened

Bangladesh has long been known as a moderate Muslim nation, but that image has been threatened in recent years with the rise of attacks against religious and ethnic minorities.

The six months between November 2015 and May 2016 was a particularly gruesome period.

First, an Italian priest was shot dead in the north – an attack later claimed by IS. Two months later, in January 2016, a 75-year-old pastor, Khaza Somiruddin, was murdered. Then in March, a 65-year-old Muslim convert to Christianity, Hossain Ali, was hacked to death. In April a Hindu tailor suffered the same fate for allegedly blaspheming against the prophet Muhammad. Then in May two people were injured after bomb attacks on a Christian home.

A report published in November last year said the government had "singularly failed" to protect Christians and other minorities from increasingly frequent violent attacks by Islamic extremists linked to Al-Qaeda.

However, in a move to curb the growth of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh, the government in October ordered chapters on jihad to be removed from next year's textbooks for madrasas (Islamic schools).

Islamic leader: For Pope Francis a fatwa against extremism signed by 100,000 imams

By Anna Chiara Fillice

AsiaNews.it (29.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2hZk05d> - "We will deliver a letter to Pope Francis containing a fatwa against extremism signed by 100,000 imams" announces, Allamma Majharul Islam, Grand Khatib (great guardian) of Amber Shahi Jami Mosque, in the Kawran Bazaar area in Dhaka speaking in an exclusive interview with AsiaNews.

We meet him in the mosque of which he is guardian in the evening, while the students of his madrasa (Koranic school) recite Islamic prayers (see photo). Over a cup of tea and a pastries prepared by the wife of an imam who accompanies him, he reflects on interreligious harmony, how to build peace in Bangladesh, Islamic fundamentalism. Above all, he emphasizes: "Islam does not allow any form of terrorism. As a preacher, I teach my students that Islam means peace, and to not offend anyone's religious feelings." Below our interview.

Grand Khatib, how will you welcome the Pope and what do you want to say to him?

We welcome Pope Francis with immense joy. He is a world leader. He comes to a small Islamic country. His visit honors us, because he is not only the head of Christians, but a

leader of all the faithful. Each religion brings with it a message of peace, and the Holy Father promotes it in an appropriate manner. I will be one of the 500 Islamic religious people who will meet Pope Francis [during the interreligious and ecumenical rally for the peace on December 1st, in the archbishopric garden]. On that occasion we will hand him a letter containing a fatwa against Islamic extremism signed by 100,000 Muslim religious leaders.

What do you expect Pope Francis will say to Muslims?

The Holy Father will bring a message of love, especially for the Rohingya, and will help them solve their refugee problem. Surely his visit will lead to a rapid resolution of the crisis [Muslim refugees fleeing from Myanmar and camped in makeshift shelters in Cox's Bazaar]. At the same time, as an Islamic leader, I believe that they should return to Myanmar because they have never been citizens of Bangladesh. And above all because everyone has the right to live in their own place of origin.

In your opinion, how can one encourage the harmony and coexistence between religions in Bangladesh? And among the Shiite, Sunni and Sufi Muslim faithful?

We have created the World Religious Forum (WRF), which brings together Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist religious leaders. I am the coordinator. With this forum we do not just want to build relations of brotherhood between Sunni and Shi'ite, but also among other religions. We organize programs for interreligious dialogue with those who practice the true religion that is peace. Also Card. Patrick D'Rozario [Dhaka's Archbishop] is part of the group and is directly involved in the initiatives. We have also received numerous letters of thanks from the Vatican for our great contribution to the building of interreligious harmony.

Can you give us some concrete examples of coexistence and respect between religions?

In recent years, some comments on religious violence at Cox's Bazar, **or against Rongpur's Christians**, or that justified **the murder of Sunil Gomes**, a Catholic in Natore, were published on Facebook. We organized a march of protest, attended by 5,000 imams and faithful. It was the first time the WRF protested against sectarian attacks on the faithful of other religions. The interreligious program has also resonated in all the media and we have received appreciation from several sides.

You will have heard of the [recent attack in Sinai](#), which left more than 300 people dead and targeted a Sufi Mosque. What are your feelings about it?

When I heard the news, I felt a deep pain in my heart. They are terrorists. We are against violence. We are saddened by all the atrocities that occur in the world, not only towards Muslims but also towards Christians, Buddhists and Hindus.

How can we ensure peace and social justice in your country?

We work to ensure social justice and in this we are supported by government policies. I maintain that everyone should enjoy their rights, including the Rohingya. We also support women's development and help widows. To ensure peace, we work together with other religious leaders so that they enjoy the freedom to preach according to the values of their religion. No faith promotes religious violence. And as far as Islamic terrorism is concerned, no religion allows conflict and killing.

And how can we curb terrorism?

We have to start from education. We teach our values in the madrasse. We teach the students the true teachings of Islam. We motivate young people and tell them there is no place for weapons or attacks on other believers. I am proud to say that 90% of WRF

members are Koranic students. Fundamentalism in this country is rooted in an incorrect education. Then we also have to be careful about the sermons. In Bangladesh there are about 300,000 mosques, of which 10,000 in Dhaka alone. In my mosque about 8,000 Muslims pray, including several government ministers. I am a consultant to the Minister of the Interior and I have the task of controlling the preaching, in order to prevent the imams from indulging in hate speech. If we realize that someone teaches the wrong lessons and encourages extremism, we must act against them.

The rise of radical Islam in Bangladesh

UCA News (21.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2iMS05y> - Despite many similarities, Bangladesh and Myanmar in racial terms could not be more different. In Bangladesh, 99 percent of its population are ethnic Bengalis whereas Myanmar is one of the most ethnically diverse nations on earth with 135 different, officially recognized religious and ethnic groups.

The mono-ethnicity in Bangladesh is matched by the overwhelming number of Muslims in the country and has seen minority religions targeted at various times since 1947 when it became East Pakistan. In recent years, the scourge of radicalism, which preys on poverty ridden communities, has become all too evident in Bangladesh.

During the period of Pakistani rule (1947-71), the Pakistani establishment and military regimes in the western capital of Islamabad, dominated by Urdu-speaking West Pakistanis, treated Bengali East Pakistanis as "neo-colonial subjects." Discriminatory and exploitative political, economic, social and cultural policies and strategies were undertaken to disenfranchise Bengali people and to subjugate them.

During Pakistan rule, religious and ethnic minorities were also targeted by the state. Hindus, the largest minority, faced persecution due to Pakistan's animosity towards Hindu-majority India. A discriminatory land law called "Enemy Property Act" passed in 1965 allowed the government to confiscate property of people it deemed "enemies of the state" and the prime targets were Hindus.

Bengalis in East Pakistan shared a common faith, Islam, with West Pakistanis. However, the rulers in Islamabad considered them to be "bad Muslims" who held liberal views on religion and mixed easily with other faiths in striking contrast to orthodox Islamic West Pakistan. This oppression by successive Pakistani regimes sparked a resentment in the Bengali people. The anger developed into the demand for greater autonomy and consequently, secession.

The crisis was full-blown when the Awami League headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (father of current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina) won an absolute majority in Pakistan's first general election in 1970. But the military regime refused to handover power. Strong nationalist protests erupted and the Pakistani government failed to offer a political solution and instead launched a genocidal military crackdown on March 25, 1971.

During the war, Pakistani military and their local Islamist collaborators killed up to 3 million civilians, raped some 200,000-300,000 women and about 10 million fled to India as refugees, according to Bangladesh Genocide Archive. For nine months Bangladeshi freedom fighters, supported by India, fought against the Pakistani military until victory was won on Dec. 16, 1971.

The 1971 war continues to inform politics in Bangladesh 46 years later. Political parties of all stripes tend to link all national issues with "the spirit of the liberation war" and compete to prove who best embodies this spirit. The legacy of war is strongly ingrained in the psyche of most Bangladeshis and any attempt to denigrate the war and its role in national life amounts to "political suicide."

Bangladesh returned to parliamentary democracy in the 1990s, following 15 years of military rule. The Awami League, founded in 1949, is the country's oldest and largest political party led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, 70.

For decades, this Muslim nation has been in the unusual situation of having two female political leaders face off in an increasingly bitter rivalry. The Bangladesh National Party chairperson, Khaleda Zia, is the widow of military ruler Ziaur Rahman who founded the party in 1978 after the military takeover.

Unlike Myanmar where one coup was enough, Bangladesh has seen 19 military coups since 1975, if only two have been successful in toppling the existing regime. Both parties have alternated in power since the restoration of democracy in the 1990s. Hasina and Zia, who have a deep personal animosity towards each other, are both the sole decision-makers for their parties and enjoy massive popular support.

National Party founder Ziaur Rahman intended to give Bangladesh an Islamic, nationalist identity with the formation of the Bangladesh National Party and helped revive Islamic politics and political parties including the radical Jamaat-e-Islami party that opposed Bangladesh's independence.

Its leadership stands accused of committing war crimes against civilians as collaborators with the Pakistan military during the 1971 war. Since 2013, a domestic war crimes court has convicted Islamist leaders from Jamaat and Bangladesh National Party, sentencing some to death and others to life sentences for war crimes, sparking deadly political violence.

Ziaur's liking for Islamists and support for Awami League's opponents among Islamists made his party a perpetual enemy of the Awami League. Following Ziaur's assassination in 1981 by a group of disgruntled officers, military chief H.M.

Ershad took over in a "bloodless coup" and ruled the country until a 1990 public uprising forced him to step down and paved way for democracy. Ershad also followed Ziaur's policy of drawing near to Islamists and during his rule Islam was constitutionally declared as the "state religion."

As national election looms at the end of 2018, political rivalry is likely to rear its ugly head again. Bangladesh National Party leaders say they will not participate in an election under Awami League citing concerns about manipulation and vote rigging.

Since 2013, Islamic militants have killed over 50 people including atheist bloggers, academics, gay activists, religious minorities and foreigners. In the absence of a peaceful political culture, religious extremists have asserted their calls for a sharia-based Islamic state. The ruling Awami League saved face after global criticism by launching a security crackdown and killed about 50 militants including top leaders, and arresting dozens.

Bangladesh now has its own homegrown militant groups. But there are also transnational jihadi groups — Islamic State and Al-Qaeda — that ideologically influence them.

More disturbingly, these groups have international financial backing, especially from Saudi Arabia where Wahhabi, or the extremist version of Islam, is practiced. The Saudis have sent billions of dollars to Bangladesh since the 1970s, funding thousands of radical mosques and madrasas, the primary breeding grounds for militancy.

Recently, Saudi Arabia announced it would donate US\$ 1.07 billion to Bangladesh to set up 560 mosques, sparking renewed concerns about radicalism. Saudi Arabia is also considered the chief backer of hardline groups and Islamic parties including Jamaat.

No elected government in Bangladesh dares to anger Saudi Arabia or resist its extremist maneuvering directly. Bangladesh has some 20 million migrant workers in Saudi Arabia,

who play a vital role in that country's economy with billions of dollars returning to Bangladesh in remittances. Fears abound that any anti-Saudi move might result in the expulsion of Bangladesh workers and cause an irreparable political disaster.

Bangladesh: Ahmadiyya Muslim Imam attacked, severely injured by extremists

A group of local mollahs attacked Imam Mustafizur Rahman inside the Ahmadiyya mosque after the Maghrib prayer on Monday.

The Times of Ahmad (08.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2pBFx6m> - An Imam of the Ahmadiyya Mosque in Khanpur, Sharisha under Ishwarganj Police Station of Mymensingh district was severely injured earlier in the evening on May 8th.

A group of local mollahs attacked Imam Mustafizur Rahman inside the Ahmadiyya mosque after the Maghrib prayer on Monday. He was chopped with sharp weapon, it was reported.

Police has rescued the Imam and brought him to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital. Victim's condition is reported critical.

Ahmadiyya representatives who reached the hospital, reported imam received at least two very deep cuts, one on the neck, and the other in the left lower abdomen.

"His left kidney came out. He is holding on miraculously," it was reported.

One attacker has been caught by local people.

[Update] Early Tuesday AM, May 9, 2017 (Dhaka Time): Imam Mustafizur Rahman has been brought to Dhaka Medical College Hospital. He is reported in stable condition.
