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Missionaries spread the faith in Bangladesh

Catholics are marking a special month in a Muslim-majority nation where Christians arrived 500 years ago.

By Stephan Uttom and Rock Rozario

La Croix International (03.10.2019) - <https://bit.ly/33bLryh> - Catholics across Bangladesh are engaging in month-long activities undertaken by the local Church to observe and celebrate Extraordinary Missionary Month.

While observing World Mission Sunday in 2017, Pope Francis set October 2019 as the month to mark the 100th anniversary of Pope Benedict XV's apostolic letter *Maximum Illud* in 1919, a document on the Church's mission to bring to the world the salvation of Jesus Christ.

The theme for this special month is "Baptized and Sent: The Church of Christ on Mission in the World."

"The Bangladeshi Church, consisting of two archdioceses and six dioceses with about 350,000 Bengali and ethnic indigenous Catholics, has outlined a series of programs to observe the "missionary nature" of the Church targeting faithful of all ages — children, young, adults and elderly.

The missionary month holds special significance for Bangladesh, where the Church's advent and growth are credited to the extraordinary contributions of missionaries and martyrs, said Bishop Shorot F. Gomes, auxiliary bishop of Dhaka.

"During our recent pastoral meeting and presbyterium meeting of priests, we have told the clergy, religious and laypeople that this missionary month is a cause of celebrations through our daily lives," Bishop Gomes told ucanews.com.

Catholics in the archdiocese are engaging more in family and community prayers, attending special Holy Masses and Holy Eucharistic Adorations, reading lives of saints, making pastoral visits and undertaking acts of mercy for poor and needy people, the prelate said.

"We are also trying to impart in them missionary or apostolic formation to let them realize the Church is missionary by nature, and this realization requires a renewal of faith," Bishop Gomes said.

Dhaka Archdiocese will continue missionary formation and activities not just this month but also next year, he added.

In Chittagong Archdiocese in the southeast, Catholics in parishes are also observing "the spirit of the month," said Anochondra Tripura, an ethnic Tripura Catholic and secretary of Queen of Fatima Church in Bandarban district of Chittagong Hill Tracts.

"Every block of our parish will have special Holy Mass and a gathering to observe the missionary month. Families and villages have been told to pray Rosaries regularly as October is also the Month of Mother Mary," Tripura told ucanews.com.

Pope Francis' message

The Church is also arranging programs for catechists, who are local missionaries supporting the existence of the Church on the hills, he said.

"Catechists make valuable contributions in propagation and living of faith for Christians in hard-to-reach areas. We would like to encourage them and enhance their capacities to be better missionaries," Tripura added.

In Dinajpur Diocese in the north, Catholics of all ages have embraced the spirit of the missionary month, said Father Anthony Sen, parish priest of Fatima Rani Church at Ruhea of Thakurgaon district.

"We have passed the Holy Father's message to all faithful and people are enthusiastic about it. In families, villages and parishes Catholics — children, youth and adults — are joining prayers, Holy Masses, seminars and voluntary acts of mercy, which are a visible expression of the Church's missionary spirit," Father Sen told ucanews.com.

The Church is incorporating the missionary month with a popular Marian pilgrimage, the priest said.

"Every year thousands of people join the Marian pilgrimage, so we have designed this year's celebrations with special emphasis on the pope's message, and we hope it will enable Catholics to better resolve living the faith and preaching the Good News in their everyday lives," Father Sen added.

Sylhet Diocese, which covers Bangladesh's tea plantation hub in the northeast, has been making coordinated efforts to observe and celebrate the missionary month.

"Most Catholics in the diocese are poor and marginalized tea estate workers and residents of punji (forested villages), mostly from various ethnic groups, so the Church has designed programs and activities to reach out to them more during the month and beyond," Pius Nanuar, a social worker and youth activist based in Sylhet, told ucanews.com.

Nanuar, an ethnic Kharia Catholic, said a shortage of clergy and religious means that Catholics are unable to use the Church's pastoral services regularly, which the diocese wants to address during this period.

"The bishop, diocesan commissions, clergy and religious have planned to make pastoral visits to people in tea estates and villages to help them become missionaries in their own places and become models for non-Christians around them. This is the message the local Church wants to convey to people," he added.

The Catholic Church in Bangladesh bears the legacy of European and American missionaries. They followed Portuguese Catholic merchants who arrived in Chittagong port in 1517 and set up the first Christian settlements in what was then East Bengal of India in 1518.

Two Portuguese Jesuit priests, Father Francesco Fernandes and Father Dominic D'Souza, were the first missionaries to arrive in 1598, marking the first steps of the Catholic Church in this part of the world.

Today Muslim-majority Bangladesh has about 600,000 Christians, mostly Catholics, in a population of more than 160 million.

In February, the local Church celebrated 500 years of the advent of Christianity in the country by paying tributes to early missionaries and martyrs.

50 Ahmadiyyas injured in co-ordinated attack on the community in Panchagarh

Islamists vandalized and torched the houses owned by Ahmadiyyas to protest the minority group holding its annual 'jalsha,' a probe committee has been formed to investigate the attack

By Sazzadur Rahman Sazzad

Dhaka Tribune (13.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Hc8nWt> - Around 50 people have been injured in co-ordinated attacks by hardline Islamist groups on minority Ahmadiyyas in Panchagarh over holding of a "jalsha", despite the local authorities cancelling the annual convention of the minority group.

The attacks took place on Tuesday night on the streets of Ahmadnagar, the part of town where members of the minority Muslim sect have their homes and businesses, confirmed Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Panchagarh police station Abu Akkas.

The incident occurred between 9pm and 11pm. The injured have been admitted to Rangpur Medical College and Hospital.

The district authorities on Tuesday cancelled the three-day "jalsha", which was scheduled to begin on February 22, amid protests from conservative Muslim groups.

A five-member probe committee has been formed to look into Tuesday's attack.

The committee constituted with additional district magistrate Ehtesham Reza as its head has been asked to submit its report within three days.

Meanwhile, teams of the district administration and police administration visited the area on Wednesday and talked to the followers of the community.

Besides, police and Border Guard Bangladesh members have been deployed in the area to fend off further trouble.

Meanwhile, Shah Ahmed Shafi, the de facto leader of the hardline Islamists in Bangladesh and the inspirational leader of the umbrella organization Hefazat-e-Islam, has demanded the Ahmadiyya Muslim community declared as non-Muslims, immediately.

He also demanded the three-day Ahmadiyya religious congregation—scheduled to begin on February 22 in Panchagarh district—be stopped.

Shafi made the demand on Wednesday during a press briefing at Al-Jamiatul Ahlia Darul Ulum Moinul Islam, also known as Hathazari Madrasa, in Chittagong.

While speaking at the press briefing, Shafi said that they will be compelled to undertake tougher responses, like a long march towards Panchagarh, if the congregation is not stopped.

"The demand to declare the Ahmadiyyas as non-Muslims is part of protecting the fundamental principles of Islam. Muslims [will] face various problems in their social and religious life if the Ahmadiyyas are not identified and declared as non-Muslims," said Shafi.

Islamists do not consider the Ahmadiyyas- also known as Qadianis- to be Muslim and have called for them to be banned. The 1,00,000 Ahmadiyyas in Bangladesh have faced repeated attacks and are often barred from establishing mosques. The group is banned in Pakistan.

Rangpur Additional Divisional Commissioner Abdullah Sajjad, Panchagarh Deputy Commissioner Sabina Yasmin, Superintendent of Police Md Ghiasuddin Ahmed, and other officials inspected the scene of the incident and visited the injured.

They gave assurances of bringing to book those involved with the attacks. Police and BGB have been deployed in Ahmadnagar to keep the situation under control.

Ahmadiyya leaders protest attack

Leaders of the community protest the attack on their people, their houses and businesses in Panchagarh.

Nayeb-e-ameer of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Ahmed Tabshir Chowdhury, at a press briefing in Salana Jalsha field in Ahmed Nagar in the afternoon, claimed at least seven of the Muslim minority were injured, three critically.

He urged the government to take immediate action against the criminals who organized and carried out the attacks.

Among others, Mawlan Abdul Awal Khan Chowdhury, in-charge of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Mollabek, Taher Jugal, president of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Panchagarh unit and Shafiqul Islam, president of Panchagarh Press club also spoke at the programme.

How the clashes began

Around 8pm on Tuesday, followers of conservative groups under the banners of Khatm-e-Nubuwwat Shongrokkhon Parishad, Iman Akida Raksha Committee, Islami Jubo Samaj and local Towhidi Janata - all protesting the celebration of the "jalsha" - started a procession.

After the procession ended, the protesters blocked the Dhaka-Panchagarh highway near Sher-e-Bangla Park intersection in Panchagarh town.

At that time, traffic on both sides of the highway came to a halt. When the protestors tried to march towards Ahmadnagar, police blocked their path on Korotoa Bridge.

Enraged, the protestors started throwing brickbats at the police, who used rubber bullets and teargas to calm the situation.

A chase and counter-chase ensued between the protestors and the law enforcers that lasted for one and a half hours, injuring people on both sides.

At one point, a group of protestors broke away and advanced to Ahmadnagar, where they vandalized and set fire to several houses of the Ahmadiyyas, injuring at least 40 people of the minority group.

"Around 40 of our people have been injured," Ahmadnagar Muslim Convention President Taher claimed. "Our women were forcibly brought out to the streets and harassed. Our houses and furniture at the jalsha meeting site were vandalized and torched."

Movement in the area was disrupted from 9pm to 11pm, while local shops remain closed fearing further violence.

The last few decades have seen a number of attacks targeting Ahmadiyyas in Bangladesh.

In 1999, a bomb ripped through an Ahmadiyya mosque in the southern city of Khulna, killing at least eight worshippers.

In 2015, a suicide blast by a suspected Islamist extremist at an Ahmadiyya mosque in Rajshahi's Bagmara, wounded three people.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attack, but the authorities blamed the home-grown militant group a faction of Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), known as New JMB to the authorities, which is accused of killing scores of religious minorities including Hindus, Christians, Sufi Muslims and Shias.

Clashes despite cancellation of Jalsha

The anti-Ahmadiyya group carried out the attacks on Ahmadnagar, despite assurances from the local administration that the "jalsha" had been cancelled.

The Ahmadiyya's annual convention was slated to be held from February 22-24. On February 4, Khatm-e-Nubuwwat Shongrokkhon Parishad held a press briefing at the Panchagarh press club to place their demands for cancelling the "jalsha".

At 8pm on Tuesday, leaders from Towhidhi Janata and other organizations met at the deputy commissioner's office, where the decision to cancel the event was announced.

Despite that, a group of protesters went to Ahmadnagar and attacked Ahmadiyya houses and the convention site, OC Abu Akkas said.

Finally, Additional Deputy Commissioner Md Golam Azam announced the cancellation decision through a loudspeaker from Panchagarh Bazar mosque and requested everyone to go back home around 11pm.

"The district administration decided to cancel the jalsha on Tuesday night," the OC said. "However, even before the announcement, followers of conservative groups and locals started demonstrating on the streets.

"Police fired rubber bullets and lobbed teargas shells to bring the situation under control," the OC added. "But a portion of the protesters still went to Ahmadnagar and attacked the minority group."

Superintendent of Police Md Ghiasuddin Ahmed said the police are investigating the incident. "A scattered group of the conservatives carried out the attacks. We are looking into the matter and will take legal action against those responsible."

Deputy Commissioner Sabina Yasmin said: "The Sunnis demanded cancellation of the convention. Even though we agreed to their demands and took the decision to cancel the jalsha, they engaged in acts of violence. We will take steps against that."

Medical officer of Panchagarh Sadar Hospital Dr Pradip Kumar Banik said among the 21 injured admitted to the hospital, one of them is in critical condition.

Missionaries, martyrs and 500 years of faith in Bangladesh

Country fetes half a millennium since first Portuguese missionaries arrived in Chittagong with a raft of activities

By Rock Ronald Rozario

La Croix International (28.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Bb4Nbs> - Archbishop Moses M. Costa of Chittagong delivers a Mass during the annual Marian pilgrimage at Our Lady of Lourdes shrine in Diang in eastern Bangladesh in 2018. The Church will host a jubilee marking 500 years of Christianity in the country on Feb. 7-8 in the same city. (Photo by Stephan Uttom/ucanews.com)

For centuries the port of Chittagong, washed by the waters of the Karnaphuli River, has fascinated and attracted travellers, traders, kings, warriors, and preachers of various religions.

In 1517, the river brought Portuguese Catholic merchants to Chittagong. The first group left after their business was done, but a second group that arrived in 1518 decided to stay in Chittagong and nearby Diang, setting up the first Christian settlements in erstwhile East Bengal (now Bangladesh).

"The Portuguese came mainly for business, but they also brought with them the faith in Christ. They developed the first community of Christians," Holy Cross Archbishop Moses M. Costa of Chittagong told ucanews.com.

Portuguese Jesuit priest Father Francesco Fernandez was the first Catholic missionary to set foot in Chittagong in 1598. Two Jesuit priests — Father Melchior de Fonseca and Father Andre Boves — and two Dominican priests followed his footsteps in 1599, and a band of Augustinian missionary priests turned up in the 1600s.

The Augustinians spearheaded the massive conversion of locals, mostly lower-caste Hindus from fishing community and port laborers, as well as slaves from various Indian states brought to Chittagong by merchant ships in 1622-1635.

By the middle of the 17th century, Catholics in Chittagong and neighboring areas stood at around 29,000.

Father Fonseca and Father Boves set up two churches in Diang and Chittagong in 1600, marking the first foothold of the Church in this part of the world.

Martyrs lay foundation

The Church faced political and social threats amid a tug-of-war between the Mughal Empire that ruled what is now India and the Arakan Kingdom, now part of Myanmar's Rakhine State.

In 1600, the Arakanese king ordered a military invasion of Chittagong and Diang, presumably in retaliation for the Portuguese navy's support for the Mughal emperor during the war between the Mughals and the Arakanese. Portuguese support played a crucial role in defeating the Arakan army.

Some historians have attributed the invasion to the longstanding rivalry between the Portuguese and the Arakanese as they fought for control of Sandwip Island in the Bay of Bengal.

In 1602, the Arakanese army carried out another attack that saw most of the churches in Chittagong and Diang torched.

During the raids, Arakanese soldiers detained Father Fernandez for his support of Portuguese families. They assaulted, blinded, and incarcerated the priest, who died in captivity on Nov. 14, 1602, becoming the first martyr of Bengal.

The army also detained, enslaved, and tortured Father Boves.

The bloodiest Arakanese invasion took place in 1607.

Soldiers massacred 600 Christian men, women and children and set their bodies alight on the grounds of where now stands the Our Lady of Lourdes Marian Shrine and the Miriam Ashram Church of Diang.

In 1625, Arakanese soldiers beheaded 14 Portuguese Christians in Chittagong for refusing to denounce their faith.

"The Church is indebted to those early missionaries and martyrs, who kept their faith despite all the persecution and challenges they faced. Their toil and blood laid and strengthened the foundation of the Church," Archbishop Costa said.

From strength to strength

In 1845, the Vatican erected the East Bengal Apostolic Vicariate comprising the whole territory of present-day Bangladesh and parts of neighboring India and Myanmar.

The Vatican also appointed Bishop Thomas Oliff as the first Apostolic Vicar. He was based in Chittagong at the beginning but was later sent to Dhaka.

From 1866-1926, the territory of Chittagong was entrusted to Dhaka Diocese.

Chittagong Diocese was created in 1927.

In 2015, the Vatican created Barishal Diocese after carving out southern territories from Chittagong.

Chittagong was elevated to an archdiocese on Feb. 2, 2017, with Moses M. Costa as its first archbishop.

From its humble beginnings five centuries ago, the Catholic Church has grown steadily in the country thanks to the tireless service of foreign and local missionaries.

Christians, mostly Catholics, account for less than half a percent of this Muslim-majority country's population of 160 million, or just 600,000 people.

Catholics are spread over eight dioceses and archdioceses. Apart from the majority Bengalis, half hail from different indigenous communities.

Contributions to society

Despite being a tiny minority, Christians are highly regarded by Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists for their contributions in the fields of education, healthcare and other services for the underprivileged and helpless.

"Christians have had a positive impact on this land. They have been involved in the socio-economic, cultural and political spheres, and earned praise from everyone for their services rendered," Nirmol Rozario, president of the Bangladesh Christian Association, told ucanews.com.

The Church in Bangladesh runs one university, 10 colleges and more than 500 primary and high schools, offering education to about 100,000 pupils a year, most of them Muslims.

The Catholic and Protestant Churches operate about 16 hospitals and more than 100 medical clinics in rural and urban areas, catering to the medical needs of people across various faiths and ethnicities.

Meanwhile, the Catholic charity Caritas Bangladesh is one of the largest non-governmental organizations in the country. It operates through eight regional offices as it carries out integrated community development, disaster management, and human resources development.

English Baptist missionary William Carey translated and printed the Bible in Bengali, in addition to many other books he helped translate including a Bengali dictionary.

He also developed Bengali typefaces for printing and pioneered the first local printing press, which he used to publish newspapers and periodicals.

Christian missionaries also developed and promoted a colloquial and simplified form of the language from its highly sophisticated form.

Kripa Shashtror Orthobhed, a catechism written by Portuguese Catholic missionary Father Manuel Da Asumpcao, which was printed in 1743 in Portugal, is the first colloquial Bengali book in print using Latin script. Missionaries also codified Bengali grammar and wrote Bengali-Portuguese and Portuguese-Bengali dictionaries.

Chittagong: Unity in diversity

Today, the Church's sphere of influence in Chittagong covers three areas: Chittagong city, Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), and other mission territories. The area is home to an estimated 30,000 Catholics.

CHT, Bangladesh's only mountainous region bordering India and Myanmar, is home to some 17,000 indigenous Catholics. From the outset, the Church in Chittagong has been multi-ethnic and multicultural.

Catholics here are divided into three major groups — descendants of Portuguese and Anglo-Indians; Bengali migrants from Barishal, Noakhali and other parts of the country; and local and migrant indigenous peoples.

Currently, Chittagong Archdiocese has 11 parishes, four mission centers and 15 sub-centers.

"Since its inception, the Catholic Church in Chittagong has focused on the strong participation of laypeople in its pastoral life," Manik Willver D'Costa, the pastoral coordinator of Chittagong Archdiocese, told ucanews.com.

"It also pioneered dialogue between the different faiths and ethnicities. Its elevation to an archdiocese opened up new opportunities for the faithful so they could join the new church," he added.

He noted how parts of Bangladesh remain "virgin land" for those bent on evangelization.

"On the hills over there, evangelization only took place about 60 years ago. Other areas are still untouched so there are many untapped opportunities for clerics and missionaries to carry out pastoral activities," D'Costa added.

Jubilee celebrations

The Catholic Church in Chittagong dedicated 2017 as the "Year of Mission" to pave the way for the jubilee celebrations of 2018 to mark half a millennium of Christianity in Bangladesh.

It instructed Catholics to focus on "reflection, discussion, and "catechism" so they could "renew their faith" on this momentous occasion.

The archdiocese outlined and carried out activities based on six pastoral priorities for this special year — catechism and confirmation of faith, education and culture, organization development, economic sustainability, health services, and evangelization.

The final celebrations will be held in Diang, and also in Chittagong to honor the sacrifices made by those early missionaries and martyrs, on Feb. 7-8. Thousands of Catholics, clergy and religious folk from various parts of the country, as well as neighboring India and Myanmar, are expected to participate.

The celebrations will include special prayers, a Marian pilgrimage, holy Mass, interfaith gatherings, and cultural programs.

Cardinal Fernando Filoni, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Evangelizations of Peoples, is due to attend some of the festivities.