

Bangladeshi Christians Charged With Offending Muslims

☒ Police in Bangladesh have charged two Christians and their four Muslim friends with “hurting religious sensibility” just three days after they were cleared of any wrongdoing.

The accused will appear in court tomorrow to face the charges, which were filed against them three days after they were exonerated on April 10. They had been arrested on March 24 in Damurhuda, Chuadanga district, some 210 kilometers (126 miles) northwest of Dhaka, under Section 54 of the penal code, which provides a special power to police to arrest anyone on any suspicion. They were released on bail three days later.

Mannan Mridha, a pastor in the Way of Peace movement of 490 house churches in northwest Bangladesh, told Compass that the second case was filed only to stop Christian activities in the area.

“The case was also filed simply to harass the Christians,” Mridha said.

Carpas Danga camp police from the Damurhuda police station on April

13 charged
the men with "hurting religious feelings" of area Muslims
after a
foreign doctor offered Bibles to patients at a health camp
where the
accused were volunteering. The accused men, including the four
Muslims
previously misidentified as Christians, appeared in district
court on
June 1.

A group of Christians under the direction of the
Way of Peace movement had arranged a two-day health camp
offering free
treatment to poor villagers in Damurhuda earlier this year.
Around 100
villagers attended the camp for free treatment on March 23,
and a
Japanese doctor treated them. The next day, more than 400
people were
supposed to attend the health camp.

The Japanese volunteer
doctor offered Christian leaflets and Bibles to the patients,
telling
them they were under no obligation to take the literature,
sources said.
Area Muslims stirred up residents against the doctor,
according to
police, and the angry villagers had police arrest the
Christians. The
foreign doctor was not named in either of the cases filed
against the
six nationals.

"These books seriously hurt the religious
sentiments among the Muslims," police charged in the second
case. "After

thorough investigation, we found it true that the accused were engaged in the activities of hurting religious sentiments.”

One of the accused, 30-year-old Christian convert Nurul Islam, told Compass that the Japanese doctor had discussed with villagers the devastation of the earthquake and the tsunami that ripped through northeastern Japan on March 11, showing some pictures of its destruction published in newspapers.

“He also talked about life, how transient it is, and also about eternal life in the after-world,” said Islam. “He recited some verses from the Bible about eternal life and how to achieve it. Then he told the people that he had Bibles, so anyone could take them if they liked.”

The volunteers at the clinic said they did not expect the doctor to offer this spiritual message.

“In fact, we were not informed and did not know that the Japanese doctor would distribute Bible[s] among the patients,” Islam said. “He did it spontaneously.”

The Christians had obtained permission from the government to operate the free health camp. They had urged officials and police to provide protection to the doctor, as Maoist

insurgents in western Bangladesh are known to kill and kidnap area residents. The government provided two policemen.

“The police investigation alleged that we were propagating Christianity under the cover of free treatment,” Islam said. “If we had that kind of motive, we would not seek permission from the government and police. We would have done it secretly.”

Villagers were not upset about the Bible distribution, he said.

“At that time a Cricket World Cup match was going on,” he said. “So there was a huge hue and cry in a nearby club over the afternoon match.”

Suddenly four policemen appeared in the health camp out of nowhere, he said.

“Police told us, ‘For security reasons, you need to come with us. If you stay here, you will be in trouble,’” Islam said. “Police also said, ‘We will let you free in the nearby Carpas Danga police camp.’ But later they took us to the Damurhuda police station.”

At the police station, officers confiscated their watches, mobile phones, belts, glasses and money, he said.

“Later police went to the hotel room that we had booked for guests

coming from

Dhaka,” Islam said. “They went there and rummaged through everything.

We had medicines there, which we did not find after the police search.

Police arrested two Muslims from that hotel. In total, the role of police was very mysterious.”

Way of Peace’s Mridha said the police’s witnesses were less than credible.

“In

this case, police used three witnesses who are drug peddlers and

smugglers living near the Indian border,” he said. “Police did not use

any good villager as a witness. Police should improve the law-and-order

situation of the country, rather than put our lives in trouble.”

Contradiction

Under

Section 54, police are required to submit a primary investigation

report within 15 days of beginning prosecution, sources said.

A

judge asked police to submit a report against the Christians about

their accusations, but officers were unable to submit anything, they

said. Receiving no convincing answers from police, the judge discharged

all the accused Christians on April 10.

The second case filed

by police Sub-inspector Jubaet Khan, however, claims, “The accused have done recognizable offense, and they were sent to the honorable court under section 54 of the penal code, and a report was submitted to the court.”

The Bangladeshi constitution provides for people to propagate their religion subject to law, but authorities and communities often objected to efforts to convert people from Islam, according to the U.S. Department of State’s 2010 International Religious Freedom report.

Bangladesh is the world’s third-largest Muslim-majority nation, with Muslims making up 89 percent of its population of 164.4 million, according to *Operation World*. Christians are less than 1 percent of the total, and Hindus 9 percent.