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.