

Buddhist Extremists Drive Christians from Village in Bangladesh

✖ Four Christian families in southeastern Bangladesh left their village Sunday under mounting pressure by Buddhist extremists to give up their faith in Christ.

Sources told Compass that 20 to 25 Buddhists brandishing sticks and bamboo clubs in Jamindhonpara village, 211 miles southeast of Dhaka, began patrolling streets on April 30 to keep the 11 members of the Lotiban Baptist Church from gathering for their weekly prayer meetings. On Saturday, the Buddhist extremists captured four men and beat one woman who had gathered in a home, threatening to kill them if they did not become Buddhists within 24 hours.

Sunday, the Buddhist extremists attacked the homes of the Baptists two hours before their 1 p.m. worship service, sources said.

“Just two hours before our church service, a group of people swooped into our houses and drove all of us out so we could not attend the church service,” said one church member who requested anonymity.

The Christians captured Saturday night were released after the extremists, who ripped crosses off the walls of their homes, threatened to kill them if they continued praying and worshipping in the area. After Sunday’s attacks, all Christians in Jamindhonpara fled, taking shelter in another village, source said. Jamindhonpara is located in the Lotiban area, Panchari sub-district of Khagrachari district.

“When they come, they do not listen to us,” said the church member. “They arbitrarily do whatever they like. The situation

is indescribable – they hunt us down the same way that one hunts down a mad dog to kill it.”

On Saturday the Buddhist villagers chanted anti-Christian slogans as they formed a procession that snaked through the village.

“They chanted in the demonstration, ‘We will not allow any Christian to live in this area,’ ‘We will not allow them to build a church here,’ and ‘Christians cannot live in Buddhists’ areas,’” said one source. “We did not inform the police or army. Informing them is very dangerous. They could even kill us if we complained about them to police and army or the local administration.”

Local Buddhists were infuriated when Christians established a church in the Lotiban area in December; since then, they have been trying to stop all Christian activities. In the campaign to uproot Christianity, they have tried to expel the pastor of Lotiban Baptist Church by means of various threats, source said.

One of the Christians who fled yesterday, 65-year-old Biraj Kumar Chakma, told Compass that they would not go back to Buddhism whatever pressure might come.

“We left everything,” Chakma said. “We can go through any kind of ordeal, but we will not leave Jesus, even in the face of death. I have not seen in my life a book like the Bible. To stick to it, I left my ancestral house under huge pressure of the Buddhists. They applied much force to give up our faith.”

Chakma said that since his daughter became a Christian, she has not been able to live in the village.

“She is living in a hideout for her safety,” he said.

The Rev. Sushil Jibon Tripura, president of Khagrachari district Baptist Fellowship Church, told Compass that the

daily life of the Christian villagers has become intolerable, as they have sacrificed their livelihood for their faith.

“Buddhists are not giving them any work,” Tripura said. “They are not allowed to collect drinking water from local deep tube wells. Nobody mixes with them. They are not allowed to shop in the village market. So the Buddhist villagers have ostracized them.”

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) runs various projects in the area for the development of tribal people, but most the committee members are Buddhists who deprive the Christians of UNDP assistance, he said. The aid includes financial help for ginger cultivation and small cattle farming and cooperative money given through a committee selected from among the villagers.

“When they were Buddhist, they used to get all the aid provided by the UNDP,” Tripura said. “But when they became Christians, they started facing problems. Recently the committee members took away eight passbooks from Christian villagers given by the UNDP for getting financial help.”

Tripura said he informed the district UNDP office, and officials there said they would look into it.

The United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF), an armed group in the hill districts that is also a political party, is active in the area. Tripura said some area Buddhists have mobilized only mid-level activists of the UPDF against the Christians.

“Being an inhabitant of this area, I can say that the high-command of the UPDF is not involved here,” he said.

The tribal people of the area share common ancestors and the same social/cultural milieu, he added.

“We are brothers. But the undercurrent of the hatred is religion,” Tripura said. “We are trying to sit with the

Buddhist leaders along with the UPDF leaders for resolving the matter in a peaceful manner.”

The UPDF is one of two main tribal organizations in the hill districts, the other being the United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti, or PCJSS). The PCJSS, formed in 1973, had fought for autonomy in the region for 25 years, leaving nearly 8,500 troops, rebels and civilians killed. After signing a peace accord in 1997 with the Bangladesh government, the PCJSS laid down arms.

But the UPDF, founded in 1998 and based in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, has strong and serious reservations against the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord signed in 1997. Claiming that the agreement failed to address fundamental demands of the indigenous Jumma people, the UPDF has pledged to fight for their full autonomy.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts region comprises three districts: Bandarban, Khagrachuri and Rangamati. The region is surrounded by the Indian states of Tripura on the north and Mizoram on the east, Myanmar on the south and east.