

Christians Exonerated of Offending Muslims

A court in Bangladesh on Thursday exonerated two Christians along with four Muslim friends accused of “hurting religious sensibility.”

Nurul Islam, another Christian and their Muslim friends were cleared of the charge after police failed to provide documentation of any evidence against them, an attorney said.

In March, 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 area in Chuadanga district, some 210 kilometers (126 miles) northwest of Dhaka.

Around 100 villagers attended the camp for free treatment the first day, March 23, and a Japanese doctor treated them. But two of the Christian organizers and their Muslim friends were arrested on March 24 under Section 54 of the penal code, a special power granted to police to arrest anyone on any suspicion.

They were released on bail three days later. Police are required to submit a primary investigation report within 15 days of the beginning of prosecution, and when they failed to do so, the Christians were released at a hearing on April 10. Police again filed a case on April 13, however, charging them with “hurting religious feelings” of area Muslims after a foreign doctor offered Bibles to patients at a 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, Christian said. The foreign doctor was not named in either of the cases.

Lawyer Aksijul Islam Ratan told Compass that police had

harassed his clients from the beginning, saying officers rather than any known victim filed the case as plaintiff.

"It was a very complicated case, as neither any individual nor any group filed the case," Ratan said. "But the accusations from the government side against the Christians were baseless, so the honorable court exonerated them."

The Christians were accused of distributing leaflets to convert poor Muslims, thus allegedly hurting the religious feelings of those in the area, said Ratan.

"The police harassed them from the very beginning, and what the police did was excessive," he said. "Again police could not show relevant documents regarding their charge. So the honorable court did not take the charge into cognizance and discharged my clients."

Islam told Compass that justice was done in the face of police hostility against him and the others.

"We got proper justice twice from the court," he said.

The Bangladeshi constitution provides for freedom to propagate one's religion subject to law, but authorities and communities often object 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.

The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, a private U.S. research group, said government restrictions and public hostility involving religion grew in some of the most populous countries from mid-2006 to mid-2009. Besides Pakistan, the countries most restrictive or hostile towards

certain religions included India, Indonesia, Egypt, Iran, China, Myanmar, Russia, Turkey, Vietnam, Nigeria and Bangladesh – although most of these did not show much change in the three years, according to the Pew report.