

Falsely Accused Bangladesh Believers Freed

✖ A judge has dismissed a case against volunteer health care workers northwest of Bangladesh's capital city of Dhaka who were charged in March with "hurting religious feelings" after area Muslims objected to distribution of Christian literature at a health camp.

The six Christians working at the health camp offering free treatment for poor villagers in Damurhuda, Chuadanga district, some 210 kilometers (126 miles) northwest of Dhaka, were arrested on March 24 and released on bail three days later.

Mannan Mridha, pastor in the Way of Peace movement of 490 house churches in northwest Bangladesh, which established the health care camp, said a Japanese volunteer doctor offered Christian leaflets and Bibles to patients; the doctor told patients they were under no obligation to take them, Mridha told Compass.

Some area Muslims stirred up area residents against the doctor, and the angry villagers had police arrest six Christian volunteers who worked with him under Section 54 of the penal code, a special power granted to police to arrest anyone on any suspicion. Later police prosecuted the six nationals, but not the foreign doctor, under section 295-A of the penal code for hurting religious sensibilities.

"This incident of harassment is a grim reminder of how vulnerable the Christians here are in Muslim-majority society, though rights of religious freedom and freedom of expression by minorities are ensured in our constitution," Mridha said.

Under Section 54 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, said Mohammad Aksijul Islam, known as Ratan, an attorney for the Christians.

"The honorable judicial magistrate Abdul Hamid of a court in Chuadanga district discharged all of them from the case on April 10," Ratan told Compass. "The magistrate asked the court inspector of police to submit a report against the Christians about the accusation alleged by the police. But police could not submit any report. The magistrate did not get any convincing answers from police and discharged all the accused Christians."

Abdul Majid, acting court inspector of police in Chuadanga district, confirmed that police were unable to submit any evidence of wrongdoing by the Christians.

"We could not submit any investigation report in the court," Majid said. "In actual fact, the investigating officer did not submit any report within the required 15 working days."

Investigating officer Mohammad Jobaer told Compass that police had tried to prosecute six people, but not the foreigner, for hurting religious feelings under Section 295-A of the penal code.

"Those six Christians, along with the Japanese doctor, were distributing Bibles secretly along with prescriptions," he said. "Most of the people who received Bibles are illiterate. They did not know what those books were. They took those books to educated neighbors, and the literate neighbors told them that those books were nothing but Bibles. So local people became very angry with the work of the volunteer doctor and his associates."

Attorney Ratan said Bangladesh is a secular country, and therefore anyone can preach or propagate his or her religion freely.

"It is even permitted in our constitution," he said. "So,

arresting them for distributing Christian leaflets or Bible was running afoul of the law.”

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.