

# Judge Exonerates Jailed Evangelist in Bangladesh

A judge this week exonerated a Christian sentenced to one year in prison for selling and distributing Christian literature near a major Muslim gathering north of this capital city, his lawyer said.

After reviewing an appeal of the case of 25-year-old Biplob Marandi, the magistrate in Gazipur district court on Tuesday cleared the tribal Christian of the charge against him and ordered him to be released, attorney Lensen Swapon Gomes told Compass. Marandi was selling Christian books and other literature when he was arrested near the massive Bishwa Ijtema (World Muslim Congregation) on the banks of the Turag River near Tongi town on Jan. 21.

On Feb. 28 he was sentenced for “creating chaos at a religious gathering” by selling and distributing the Christian literature.

“Some fundamentalist Muslims became very angry with him for selling the Christian books near a Muslim gathering,” Gomes says, “so they harassed him by handing over to the mobile court. His release proves that he was innocent and that he did not create any trouble at the Muslim gathering.”

The judge reviewing the appeal ruled that Marandi proved in court that he sells books, primarily Christian literature, for his livelihood.

“I am delirious with joy, and it is impossible to say how happy I am,” says his brother, Sailence Marandi, pastor at Church of Nazarene International in northern Bangladesh’s Thakurgaon district. “I also thank all those who have prayed for my brother to be released.”

After processing the paperwork for Marandi's release from Gazipur district jail, authorities were expected to free him by the end of this week, according to his lawyer.

"My brother is an innocent man, and his unconditional release proved the victory of truth," Marandi says. "I am even more delighted because my brother's release proves that he was very innocent and polite."

The pastor had said his brother did not get the opportunity to defend himself at his original trial.

Marandi's attorney on appeal argued that his religious activities were protected by the religious freedom provisions of the country's constitution. The Bangladeshi constitution provides the right for anyone 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.

Every year several million male Muslims—women are not allowed—attend the Bishwa Ijtema event to pray and listen to Islamic scholars from around the world. Some 9,000 foreigners from 108 countries reportedly attended the event, though most of the worshippers are rural Bangladeshis. About 15,000 security personnel were deployed to maintain order.

Bangladeshi Muslims equate the annual event with the Hajj, the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. This year the Bangladesh event was held in two phases, Jan. 21-23 and Jan. 28-30.

At the same event in 2009, Muslim pilgrims beat and threatened to kill another Bible school student as he distributed Christian literature. A patrolling Rapid Action Battalion elite force rescued Rajen Murmo, then 20, a student at Believers' Church Bible College, on Feb. 1, 2009.

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.