

Police Beat Church Leaders in Bangladesh

Hundreds of Christians this month protested the hitting of two church leaders at a police station in southern Bangladesh after a Christian reported a local ruling party activist had occupied his house.

Bablu Biswas of Christianpara village in Gopalganj district, 62 miles (100 kilometers) south of Dhaka, had filed a police complaint accusing the son of the ruling Bangladesh Awami League (AL) district president of illegally occupying his house. Biswas said Sohel Miah, son of Gopalganj district AL leader Raja Miah Batu, seized his house on July 23. Miah is also active in the AL.

A police official of Gopalganj called the Christians and the ruling party leaders, who are Muslims, to the police station to resolve the complaint. Onukul Biswas, pastor of St. Mothuranath Assembly of God Church, was present at the police station meeting.

"The attitude of the political leaders was that we should accept everything, whatever they said. If we argued anything, they got angry," Pastor Biswas said. "At one point in the talks, Miah thrust at one of our older church leaders. He pushed him several times very inhumanly and landed a punch on his nose in front of everyone."

The Christians left the police station in protest of the assault on their elderly pastor, said Pastor Biswas, but while they were still in the police station compound, Miah and his supporters beat Mitul Bala, a Church of the Nazarene of Bangladesh elder, for protesting their hostility.

"The beating of two pastors brought disgrace upon the whole Christian community," said Biswas.

Christians across Gopalganj district quickly mobilized, with 250 to 300 gathering to demonstrate against the treatment of the Christians at the police station. The demonstrators submitted a letter of protest to the district administration chief, or deputy commissioner, who promised to resolve the dispute within a week. The Christians also demonstrated at the district press club.

House Grabbing

Bablu Biswas told Compass that a group of Muslims headed by Miah had ordered him to leave his home, falsely telling him that they had bought it.

"They warned me to leave my house for the first time on June 25," he said. "Again they threatened me on July 17, that I must leave the house or they would evict me. They gave a false reason to evict me—they said they had bought the house. Forcibly they occupied my house on July 23."

The 35-year-old Biswas said he fled the house when they issued the July 17 threat to evict him. He filed a complaint of house seizure at the nearby police station, and when police called both sides to the station on Aug. 2, about a dozen Christians arrived.

Among them was the Rev. Samuel S. Bala, president of Gopalganj Christian Fellowship and one of the organizers of the demonstration, who told Compass that the violence showed flagrant disregard for the Christian community.

"If they can beat us in the police station, they can do anything on us. Where will we get protection?" Bala said. "We held a protest rally because a police station is such a place where everybody is equal in the eyes of the law. But the son of the ruling party leader beat one of our pastors by wielding political power."

Police arrested Miah on Aug. 2, but he was released the same day, area Christians said. Police and district administrative

officials assured the demonstrators that they would recover the land within three days.

“Police and other government officials recovered the house within three days, but the son of the political leader remained unpunished,” Bala said.

Church Land Grabbing

Miah’s father, Batu, had seized a piece of St. Mothuranath church land around 20 to 25 years ago, area Christians said.

The Rev. Joseph Pandey, who was among those assaulted on Aug. 2, told Compass that the illegal occupations of the church land and house, along with other demonstrations of hostility by Muslim political leaders, threatened social and religious harmony in the area.

“Nobody sold the land to Raja Miah Batu. He occupied the land forcefully,” Pandey said. “No one is even allowed to sell the church’s land. Only the chairman of the Assembly of God denomination can sell it for the sake of the church.”

Sheikh Yousuf Harun, deputy commissioner of Gopalganj district, told Compass that officials had taken measures to quickly resolve the dispute.

“The land allegedly occupied by the ruling party leader belongs to the church. It is the church’s land,” Harun said. “The son of the AL leader did not buy the house of the Christian villager. Now there is no dispute over the church land and the Christian house.”

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.