

Two Christian Families in Bangladesh Suffer Extortion, Beatings

Two Christian women in Bangladesh's northern district of Jamalpur said village officials extorted relatively large sums of money from them – and severely beat the husband of one – for proclaiming Christ to Muslims.

Johura Begum, 42, of Pingna village said a member of the local union council, an area government representative and the father of a police officer threatened to harm her grown daughters if her family did not pay them 20,000 taka (\$283). The police officer whose father was allegedly involved in the extortion was investigating a fabricated charge that Christians had paid Muslims to participate in a river baptism on May 26.

Begum had invited seven converts from Islam, including three women, to be baptized on the occasion, she said. Only six men among 55 converts were baptized by the leaders of the Pentecostal Holiness Church of Bangladesh (PHCB), Christian leaders said, as the rest were intimidated by protesting Muslims; the next day, area Islamists with bullhorns shouted death threats to Christians.

"The council member threatened me, saying I had to give him 20,000 taka or else we could not live here with honor, dignity and security," Begum said. "If I did not hand over the money, he said I my grown-up twin daughters would face trouble."

Begum said her husband is a day-laborer at a rice-husking mill, and that 20,000 taka was a "colossal amount" for them. She was able to borrow the money from a Christian cooperative, she said.

"I gave the extortion money for the sake of our safety and security," Begum said. "It not possible to say aloud what abusive language they used against me for inviting people to God."

Villagers backed by a political leader of the ruling Bangladesh Awami League party also allegedly extorted 250,000 taka (\$3,535) from another Christian woman, 35-year-old Komola Begum of Doulatpur village, whose husband is a successful fertilizer seller.

The villagers claimed that she and her husband had become rich by receiving funds from Christians. After the baptisms, local Muslims beat her husband to such an extent that he received three days of hospital treatment for his injuries, she said.

Komola Begum, who had invited 11 persons including three women to the baptisms, told Compass that her husband's life was spared only because she paid what the Muslims demanded.

"My husband is a scapegoat – he simply does business," she said. "But he was beaten for my faith and activities."

False Charge

The 55 baptisms were to have taken place on the banks of the Brahmanputra River in Mymensingh district, 110 kilometers, or 68 miles, north of Dhaka (Jamalpur is 140 kilometers, or 87 miles, northwest of Dhaka).

Leaders of the PHCB congregation had begun baptizing the converts, and the rage of area Muslims flared as they staged a loud protest at the site, area Christians said. Police soon arrived and detained the Christian leaders and others present.

At the police station, officers forced one of those present at the baptism, 45-year-old Hafijur Rahman, to sign a statement accusing four of the Christian leaders of offering him and others money to attend, Rahman told Compass.

Police swiftly arrested two of the Christian leaders, while two were able to flee.

Rahman told the Compass that he was not offered any money to go to the baptism service.

"I was not aware of the content of the case copy, later I came to know that a case was filed against the four Christian neighbors by me," Rahman said. "I am an illiterate man. Police took my fingerprint on a blank paper under duress, and later they wrote everything."

Rahman said he went to the baptisms because one of his neighbors invited him.

"I went there out of curiosity," he said. "They did not offer us any money."

The document Rahman signed charges that he and others were offered 5,000 taka (\$70) each as loan to attend a meeting in Mymensingh.

"Instead of attending a meeting, they took us to the bank of the Brahmanputra River," the document states. "Some Christian leaders had some of us bathed according to the Christian religion. Then some of us protested. The Christian leaders said, 'If you need to take loan, you need to accept Christian religion.'"

Denying that Rahman was forced to sign the document, local Police Chief Golam Sarwar told Compass that a fraud case was filed against four Christians.

"They lured local Muslims by giving them 5,000 taka to become Christian, and their activities hurt the religious sentiment of the Muslims," Sarwar said.

For three days after the baptism ceremony, Jamalpur district villagers announced through bullhorns the punishment Christians would receive for their activities, chanting among

other slogans, "We will peel off the skins of the Christians." They also shouted that they would not allow any Christians to live in that area.

Johura Begum said that when she became a Christian 20 years ago, area Muslims beat her and forced her to leave the village, though she was able to return three years later.

"Local Muslims bombarded us with propaganda – that when I became a Christian, I would have to be naked in the baptism before the Christian cleric," said Johura Begum. "Recently they are bad-mouthing Christianity with these kinds of disgraceful and scurrilous rumors, and my daughters cannot attend their classes."