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Bangladesh: Situation of Buddhists, particularly in the areas of Chittagong and Dhaka; treatment by Muslim majority, Islamist groups, authorities and political parties; protection available (2003-2005)

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General Information

The Dhaka-based newspaper *The Independent* reported that, based on information shared during a meeting of members of the Buddhist community with government officials, there are more than 2 million Buddhists in Bangladesh (24 May 2005). However, according to BuddhaNet, an Australian-based non-profit organization that spreads the teachings of Buddha online (BuddhaNet n.d.a), in 2004 there were roughly one million Buddhists living in Bangladesh, principally in Chittagong, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Comilla, Cox's Bazar, Noakhali and Barisal (ibid. n.d.b). Chittagong Hill Tracts is home to 14 tribes of Sino-Tibetan origin known collectively as the Jummas, most of whom practise Buddhism (Global IDP Project 25 Feb. 2005, 20; SAFHR Apr. 2000). The 1991 national census showed that about 51 per cent of the population in the Hill Tracts were indigenous Jumma people while 48 per cent were Bengali (Global IDP Project 25 Feb. 2005, 20). According to government figures, the Muslim majority in Bangladesh has increased in number while the Hindu, Buddhist and Christian minorities have declined in recent years (*America* 15 Sept. 2003; *Guardian* 21 July 2003).

According to the *International Religious Freedom Report 2004*, the Bangladeshi government provides funds for the development and maintenance of Buddhist temples as well as other places of worship of the other principal religious groups in the country (15 Sept. 2004, sec. 2; see also U.S. 30 Apr. 2004). Major Buddhist and other religious festivals and holy days are also observed as national holidays (*International Religious Freedom Report 2004* 15 Sept. 2004, sec. 2). During their meeting with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, the Buddhist community received assurances that the government would meet its requests for assistance in expanding the property of the Buddha Bihar located in Merul Buddha in Dhaka and preserving Bihars in several parts of the country (*The Independent* 24 May 2005).

Treatment of Buddhists

Sources note that in recent years religious minorities in the country have faced an increasing number of attacks (AI 2005; *Economist* 29 Nov. 2003; *Guardian* 21 July 2003), which some say have been perpetrated by Islamic fundamentalist elements (ibid.; *Gulf News* 23 Feb. 2003; Global IDP Project 25 Feb. 2005, 5; *Time Asia* 28 Feb. 2005). According to local organizations, Bangladesh, which has a tradition of tolerance

towards minority groups (*Economist* 18 June 2005; *Guardian* 21 July 2003), is seeing a rise in Islamic fundamentalist activity (ibid.). This trend can reportedly be attributed to the Jamaat-e-Islami, a coalition partner in the government led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (ibid.; *Gulf News* 23 Feb. 2003). According to sources, since 2001, the year the coalition government came to power, religious minorities-and Hindus in particular (Global IDP Project 25 Feb. 2005, 4-5)-have been targeted for discrimination, harassment and attacks (ibid.; *International Religious Freedom Report 2004* 15 Sep. 2004, sec. 2). Hindus, Christians and Buddhists have traditionally supported opposition political parties, including the Awami League, which lost the 2001 elections (Global IDP Project 25 Feb. 2005, 5). Reported incidents have included rape, looting and burning of homes, and forced evictions (ibid.).

In the northern region of Bangladesh, a militant group by the name of Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) has claimed responsibility for a series of bombings and the killing of Hindus and Buddhists as well as Muslims considered "too lax" (*Time Asia* 28 Feb. 2005). Human rights activists allege that religious minorities are being driven out of the country through violence by groups wishing to turn Bangladesh into an Islamic state (*America* 15 Sept. 2003; see also *Gulf News* 23 Feb. 2003). Members of religious minorities have reportedly fled villages, particularly in the western region of the country, where the Jamaat-e-Islami party has many supporters (*Guardian* 21 July 2003; *Gulf News* 23 Feb. 2003).

In August 2003, a number of villages in the Mahalchari area of the Khagrachari District of the Chittagong Hill Tracts were allegedly burnt down by Bengali settlers, leaving two dead, several injured and nearly 1,500 tribal people homeless (AI 1 Mar. 2004; Global IDP Project 25 Feb. 2005; *The Independent* 25 Sep. 2003). Four Buddhist temples were reportedly damaged and nine women sexually assaulted (AI 1 Mar. 2004; *The Independent* 25 Sept. 2003).

The Daily Star reported in January 2005 that a growing number of families from the Buddhist Rakhain community of Kuakata in the south of Bangladesh have been forced from their land in the last three years by a group of influential Bengalis (4 Jan. 2005). Some of the families have moved to Cox' Bazar and Bandaran, and others still have returned to Arakan state in neighbouring Myanmar (*Daily Star* 4 Jan. 2005). Some Rakhains told *The Daily Star* that their community has experienced increased harassment since 2001 (ibid.).

Information on the situation or treatment of Buddhists in the Dhaka region could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within time constraints.

Available State Protection

Government officials have argued that "Bangladesh is a picture of communal harmony" (*Economist* 29 Nov. 2003; see also U.S. 30 Apr. 2004). During a meeting with members of the Buddhist community, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia maintained that all Bangladeshis have the same rights, regardless of their faith (*The Independent* 24 May 2005). At the same meeting, Zia acknowledged that a segment of Bangladeshi society was inciting "'hatred among people of various regions, religions and political beliefs'" (*The Independent* 24 May 2005). However, up until recently, her government had insisted that Islamic fundamentalists were not present in the country (*Economist* 18 June 2005; *Time Asia* 28 Feb. 2005). Still, in response to suggestions in the media that militancy and violence were on the rise, the police arrested several suspected militants and banned JMJB (ibid.) in a "half-hearted effort to eradicate it" (*Economist* 18 June 2005). The Awami League argues that the ruling party, the BNP, is "turn[ing] a blind eye to violence by Islamic extremists" (*Economist* 18 June 2005) and may not be able to

control "extremism" as a result of the party's ruling alliance with fundamentalist parties (*Time Asia* 28 Feb. 2005).

In August 2004, six people who had been accused in the murder of a Buddhist monk in Raozan in 2002 were sentenced to death by the First Additional District and Sessions Judge Court (*Law and Our Rights* 5 Sept. 2004). As at 5 September 2004, the sentence was pending approval of the High Court (*ibid.*). Gyanojyoti Mohathero was killed on 21 April 2002 at a monastery in Raozan (*ibid.*).

In the Kuakata district where Buddhist Rakhains claimed to have been driven off their land, the area deputy commissioner argued that both Bengalis and Rakhains had complained of land-grabbing and harassment, and that authorities took the allegations "very seriously" (*Daily Star* 4 Jan. 2005). Further information on state assistance available to victims of forced evictions could not be found among sources consulted.

According to witness testimonies given to Amnesty International (AI), police initially refused to accept complaints from tribal residents of the Mahalchari district of the Chittagong Hill Tracts whose homes were burned down or looted in August 2003 (AI 1 Mar. 2004). Police filed two cases against Bengalis in connection with the attacks only after a court order was issued (*ibid.*). Twenty-three days after the August 2003 incidents, *The Independent* reported that no government assistance had been extended to the tribal people (25 Sept. 2003). AI noted in its 2005 country report that there had been no independent inquiry launched into the attacks of August 2003 (AI 2005).

Further information on state protection available to Buddhists in Bangladesh could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Internet sites, including: Bangladesh Human Rights Network, Center for Religious Freedom, Odhikar, United Kingdom Home Office.

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