



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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May 12, 2010

The Honorable Robert Blake
Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Ambassador Blake:

In March 2010, a large group of Muslim extremists attacked Christians in Boldipukur, a city some 200 miles north of Dhaka, following a local court decision on a land dispute which favored with the Catholic Church. News reports say some fifty people were injured, ten seriously. Local police are reported to have done little to try to stop this attack, although law enforcement officials later said they were tracking some Muslims accused of participating in the violence. At the same time, countercharges were also made by Muslims against some Catholic villagers. This incident points to the vulnerability of religious minorities, especially Christians who constitute about 1% of the total population.

As Chairman of the Committee for International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I am concerned about these sporadic, but ongoing, acts of harassment and violence directed at the Christian community in Bangladesh. As the State Department's 2009 Human Rights Report indicates, the motives for such attacks, "whether religious animosity, criminal intent, personal disputes or property disputes—were often unclear." In Boldipukur, the attack appears to be related to a long-standing dispute over land. When the court decided in favor of the Church, disgruntled Muslims attacked priests and parishioners. The Catholic Church's Episcopal Justice and Peace Commission notes that five out of a total of fourteen parishes have land-related problems so these issues will undoubtedly arise again.

In other cases, Christians are being forced off of land they have traditionally used to cultivate betel nuts or their property is being burned, as was reported in the Chittagong Hills. There is great concern that political parties may be fomenting tensions and that the Bangladesh government is slow to take action in this kind of incident as a result of pressure from the Muslim majority.

I would ask that the U.S. government convey to the Bangladesh government the strong need to protect and respect the rights of religious minorities and to bring to justice those who believe they can act with impunity against minorities.

Sincerely yours,

Most Reverend Howard J. Hubbard
Bishop of Albany
Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace