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Second blogger hacked to death in Bangladesh

Reuters (30.03.2015) - A blogger was hacked to death by assailants using machetes in the Bangladesh capital Dhaka on Monday, the second attack in five weeks on a critic of religious extremism in the Muslim-majority nation.

Washikur Rahman, a blogger advocating secularism, was attacked by young religious students on a busy street in the center of Dhaka on Monday morning, a police official said.

"Police on duty near the spot caught two attackers with three machetes as they were fleeing the scene after the incident," police official Humayan Kabir told Reuters.

In recent years, religious militants in Bangladesh have targeted secularist writers while the government has tried to crack down on hardline Islamist groups seeking to make it a Sharia-based state.

Last month U.S.-based blogger Avijit Roy, another secularist, was hacked to death while returning with his wife from a book fair in Dhaka. His wife, Rafida Bonya Ahmed, suffered head injuries and lost a finger.

Bangladesh's government and main opposition have been locked for months in a standoff that has created a sense of deepening insecurity.

"The horrifying murder of a blogger this morning... must be a 'wake up call' to the authorities on the need to create a safe environment for journalists and activists to express their views," Amnesty International said in a statement on Monday.

Blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider was killed in 2013 near his home in Dhaka after he led a protest demanding capital punishment for Islamist leaders convicted of war crimes during Bangladesh's war for independence.

In 2004, Humayun Azad, a secular writer and professor at Dhaka University, was attacked by militants while returning home from a Dhaka book fair. He died in [Germany](#) while undergoing treatment.

Roy's wife, Ahmed, blamed her husband's murder in February on religious fanatics, and accused police on duty of not doing enough to stop the attack.

Mohammad Habibur Rahman, secretary of the Bangladesh Police Association and Superintendent of Police of Dhaka, said the police had been unfairly criticized.

"There are plenty of examples where our police force come forward to save people, risking their own lives," he said.

Media group Reporters Without Borders ranked Bangladesh 146th among 180 countries for press freedom last year.

American atheist blogger hacked to death in Bangladesh

The Guardian (27.02.2015) <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/27/american-atheist-blogger-hacked-to-death-in-bangladesh> - Protests in Dhaka after Avijit Roy, whose blog championed liberal secular writing in the Muslim-majority nation, was attacked along with his wife

A prominent American blogger of Bangladeshi origin has been hacked to death with machetes by unidentified assailants in Dhaka, after he allegedly received threats from Islamists.

The body of Avijit Roy, founder of the Mukto-Mona (Free-mind) blog site – which champions liberal secular writing in the Muslim-majority nation – was found covered in blood after an attack that also left his wife critically wounded.

“He died as he was brought to the hospital. His wife was also seriously wounded. She has lost a finger,” local police chief Sirajul Islam said.

The couple were on a bicycle rickshaw, returning from a book fair, when two assailants stopped and dragged them on to the pavement before striking them with machetes, local media reported, citing witnesses.

Hundreds of protesters rallied in Dhaka to denounce the murder, chanting slogans including “we want justice” and “raise your voice against militants”.

Imran Sarker, the head of the [Bangladesh](#) bloggers’ association, said the protests would continue until those responsible were apprehended. “Avijit’s killing once again proved that there is a culture of impunity in the country,” Sarker told Agence France-Presse. “The government must arrest the killers in 24 hours or face non-stop protests.”

Roy, who was 42, is the second Bangladeshi blogger to have been murdered in two years and the fourth writer to have been attacked since 2004.

Hardline Islamist groups have long demanded the public killing of atheist bloggers and sought new laws to deal with writing critical of Islam.

“Roy suffered fatal wounds in the head and died from bleeding ... after being brought to the hospital,” Dr Sohel Ahmed told reporters.

Police have launched an inquiry and recovered the machetes used in the attack but could not confirm whether Islamists were behind the incident.

But Roy’s father said the writer, a US citizen, had received a number of “threatening” emails and messages on social media from hardliners unhappy with his writing. “He was a secular humanist and has written about 10 books,” Ajoy Roy told AFP. His most famous work was *Biswasher Virus* (Virus of Faith).

The Center for Inquiry, a US-based charity promoting free thought, said it was “shocked and heartbroken” by the brutal murder. “Dr Roy was a true ally, a courageous and

eloquent defender of reason, science, and free expression, in a country where those values have been under heavy attack," it said in a statement.

Roy's killing also triggered strong condemnation from his fellow writers and publishers, who lamented the growing religious conservatism and intolerance in Bangladesh.

"The attack on Roy and his wife, Rafida Ahmed, is outrageous. We strongly protest this attack and are deeply concerned about the safety of writers," said Sarker.

Pinaki Bhattacharya, a fellow blogger and friend of Roy, claimed one of the country's largest online book retailers was being openly threatened for selling Roy's books.

"In Bangladesh the easiest target is an atheist. An atheist can be attacked and murdered," he wrote on Facebook.

Atheist blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider was hacked to death in 2013 by members of a little-known Islamist militant group, triggering nationwide protests by tens of thousands of secular activists.

"The pattern of the killing appeared to be the same as that of previous attack on a celebrated writer," said Shiblee Noman, assistant commissioner of Dhaka police. "It seems it was carried out by a reactionary fundamentalist group."

After Haider's death, Bangladesh's hardline Islamist groups started to protest against other campaigning bloggers, calling a series of nationwide strikes to demand their deaths, accusing them of blasphemy.

The secular government of the Bangladeshi prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, reacted by arresting some atheist bloggers.

The government also blocked about a dozen websites and blogs to stem the furore over blasphemy, as well as stepping up security for the bloggers.

On Friday Sarker said: "Communal and militant groups have threatened the very spirit of our nation. Yet instead of crushing them, the government was keen on appeasing them by arresting secular bloggers."

Noman said police were investigating a tweet by the pro-Islamist group Ansar Bangla Seven that appeared to celebrate Roy's murder.

"Target Down here in Bangladesh," the group tweeted from the @AnsarBn7 handle.

The US embassy to Bangladesh offered its condolences to Roy's family and said it was providing consular assistance. Roy's wife, who is also a blogger, was moved to a clinic for further treatment on Friday.

Bangladesh is the world's fourth-largest Muslim majority nation with Muslims making up some 90 per cent of the country's 160 million people.

A tribunal has recently handed down a series of verdicts against leading Islamists and others for crimes committed during the war of independence from Pakistan in 1971.

Christian proselytizing raises tensions in Bangladesh

Secularism faces a significant challenge as the 'conversion business' booms

UCA News (05.02.2015) <http://www.ucanews.com/news/christian-proselytizing-raises-tensions-in-bangladesh/72930> - It has been almost four months since Protestant pastors Ariful Mondol and Mousumi Mondol were arrested for illegally proselytizing among Muslim villagers in Bangladesh's northwestern Lalmonirhat district. While the married couple was later released on bail, the case — still ongoing — has taken its toll on Banbhasa village.

Across Bangladesh, clashes over conversion have loomed large. In Lalmonirhat, the first case yet to surface has seen rising tensions and fissures among neighbors.

"I myself have studied in a Church school and most Muslims revere Christians in this area. Now, people are upset over the incident and they are saying bad words against Christians," said Shaon Firoz, 33, a local leader of the ruling Awami League party.

On November 9 last year, the pastors were arrested while holding a secret mass conversion.

"They attempted to convert a group of 40 Muslim villagers secretly and it made other villagers angry," said Mahfuzur Rahman, officer in-charge at Banbhasa police station in Lalmonirhat district.

The trial is ongoing and the next hearing will be held this month. If found guilty, the pastors from the fringe Church of God could face up to two years imprisonment for violating the country's religious freedom law.

Though Islam is officially the state religion, Bangladesh's constitution established the country as a secular state. The charter also protects the right to profess, practice and propagate any religion freely, but bans proselytism.

The pastors have denied any wrongdoing and defended their right to freedom of religion.

"My husband and I came to this area nine months ago and we have converted some people who wanted to become Christians, but none of them have been lured with money or other rewards," said Mousumi Mondol, 30.

Mondol alleged that a local imam who doesn't like Christians filed a case against them and provoked local Muslims with a "fabricated lured conversion" story.

The imam refused to meet and talk with ucanews.com, but an aide said the pastors should leave the area immediately or face "dire consequences".

While the case is running in court, the Muslims who wanted to convert to Christianity have backtracked fearing a backlash from fellow Muslims, according to Rahman.

The story of "lured conversion" has stuck and throughout Banbhasa village, local Muslims have expressed anger over the incident.

"I felt so angry when I heard they wanted to convert 40 Muslims for money. If police hadn't come and arrested them, people would have beaten them up," said Shafiqul Islam, 45, a Muslim who runs a tea stall in the village.

"If Muslims want to become Christians we have no problem, but we are angry because they have been lured with money and property. They will burn in hell for their sins," he added.

The Awami League party leader Firoz said some Muslim parents are considering pulling their children from the local Church school fearing they might be "entrapped for conversion".

One villager, who converted to Christianity a few months ago and spoke on the condition of anonymity, defended his decision saying he was attracted to the teachings of the Bible.

"I know Muslims say bad words about me and my family because we have left Islam to become Christians. We are happy to be Christians but now we are concerned for our safety after the recent incident," he said.

The incident in Lalmonirhat is unprecedented, but similar cases have happened across rural Bangladesh.

In the Keshobpur area of southern Jessore district, there has been a series of conversions of Muslim villagers by dozens of Protestant groups in recent years.

Rafiq Bhuiyan, 30 who converted in 2008 and became a member of the House Church of Bangladesh, admitted conversion had become something of a business for fringe Christian groups. He has since been fired from his job for reasons he claimed were nepotistic.

"I converted to Christianity with my family because they rewarded me with a house and a job in the Church. Officially all my family members are still Muslims because we have kept our Islamic names in all government documents," Bhuiyan said.

Rafiq said he previously worked for a pastor for the Church. For his part, he has helped convert about 300 people.

"In Keshobpur, about 700 Muslims became Christians in the past three years thanks to various Protestant groups. Many of them were baptized several times. The more numbers they can show, the more money they can get from foreign donors," he said.

John Jipu Roy, head of the House Church of Bangladesh, denied such claims saying Rafiq was spreading false information. But interviews with locals back his accounts of the "conversion business".

Selina Akter, 40, said she has been baptized four times and each time she received 500 taka (US\$6.40), traveling allowances and lunch.

"Every time they take our photos and sometimes foreign donors also take part in conversion programs and photo sessions," she said.

Jiten Sarker, 40, has been baptized six times but he is a member of no specific church.

"I have no problem with baptism because I get 1,000-1,500 taka each time. If I can bring in people for conversion, I can make even more money," he said.

In Keshobpur, there are 30 Christian churches and almost all are involved in the "conversion business" for money, said Gabriel Biswas, secretary of the Keshobpur unit of the Bangladesh Christian Association, a national rights forum of Christians in Bangladesh.

"Here, we have 30 churches but the number of Christian families is less than 100. People who become Christians for money go back to their own religion within a month or two," he said.

Police say unless there is violence over conversions there is nothing to worry about.

"We have not yet received any written complaints over the conversions but we have heard people are being lured with money and valuables to convert," said Mohammad Abdul Jalil, officer in-charge at Keshobpur police station.

Sayedul Islam, imam of a local mosque, said area Muslims have no problem with conversion as it is almost always temporary.

"We have seen for years that most Muslims convert back to Islam soon after. Those who don't come back we declare them 'outcast' from society, but their number is very few," he said.

Of Bangladesh's 160 million people about 90 percent are Muslims, eight percent are Hindu and the rest belong to other religions including Buddhism and Christianity. They are about 600,000 Christians in the country including about 350,000 Catholics. There are approximately 200 Protestant churches of all sizes.

Generally, Christians in Bangladesh are highly regarded by the population at large for their significant contributions in the fields of education, health and development, and services to people — mainly to the poor, the underprivileged and helpless.

Christian missionaries contributed immensely to Bengali language and literature as they promoted a more colloquial and simplified form of the language instead of using its highly sophisticated form.

However, some Christian leaders warn that Protestant groups engaging in the "conversion business" are tarnishing the image of the religion.

"Bangladesh's constitution guarantees freedom of religion but we should consider the reality before we can evangelize and convert. This is a Muslim-majority country and we all might face problems if anyone hurts the religious sentiments of Muslims," said Nirmol Rozario, a Catholic and secretary-general of the Bangladesh Christian Association.

Government officials say luring people to convert is a punishable criminal offense.

"We have heard some people are being tempted with money and other incentives to convert, in some cases punishments have been handed down," said Hasan Jahangir Alam, a joint secretary with the Religious Affairs Ministry.

"This is a secular nation, but the government will take steps against tempting conversion before things get worse," he said.
