

National news

Britain ignores Bangladeshi persecution

Government shuts door on asylum seekers despite claim that Dhaka is failing to protect minority groups from fundamentalist attackers

John Vidal in Dhaka

The British government has effectively closed the door on asylum seekers from Bangladesh despite having seen a dossier which detailed more than 700 attacks by fundamentalists on ethnic and religious minorities in the country.

The document offers compelling evidence that serious attacks and persecution of Hindu, Christian and other minorities are rising.

Backed by evidence from local and international development groups sent to the government several months ago, it includes reports on tortures, extra-judicial killings, gang rapes, the looting and burning of temples and churches, evictions, beatings, the theft of land, destruction of property, financial extortion and threats of physical violence. All the cases have been reported to the police.

Yet the Home Office appar-

ently ignored the dossier when it announced last month that Bangladesh, along with five other countries, was being added to the "white list" of 24 countries from where asylum applications are presumed from the outset to be unlikely to succeed.

"The countries that we are adding to the list today are generally safe — individuals from these countries are not routinely fleeing for their lives and do not routinely need our pro-

tection under the Geneva convention," the Home Office minister, Beverley Hughes, said.

The Home Office has reiterated that position. "Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy with a constitution that allows for an independent judiciary. We maintain our commitment to providing a safe haven for asylum seekers," a spokeswoman said, adding that Bangladeshis would still be able to seek asylum here.

But the Guardian has uncov-

ered evidence that Bangladesh is sliding into a situation in which oppression of minorities is becoming systematic.

The country, which is 85% Muslim but has a long tradition of tolerance to religious minorities, is being pushed towards fundamentalism by the Jamaat-e-Islami party, which is growing rapidly in the poorest rural areas, according to organisations on the ground. It now shares power with the majority Bangladesh National

party and effectively runs two key ministries.

"The British government knows what is happening. They have been sent the information," said Rosaline Costa, director of the human rights group, Hotline Bangladesh. "It says there is communal harmony, but this is a lie ... There are many genuine asylum seekers."

The present wave of attacks was triggered by the 2001 elections when violence flared

across Bangladesh. The Human Rights Congress for Bangladeshi Minorities estimated that dozens of people were killed, more than 1,000 women from minority groups were raped and several thousand people lost their land in the three months around the election.

"We have not seen human rights violations like this before. It has never been so bad," says Sultana Kamal, director of the legal aid group

ASK. "The assaults are taking place every day. The oppression is continuous now."

Amnesty International, which has expressed grave concern to the Bangladeshi government about mounting human rights abuses, said Britain's decision to put Bangladesh on the white list "made no sense".

The Bangladeshi government has admitted that some atrocities have taken place, but insists that the violence is not religiously motivated.