

### Introduction

**B**angladesh is a land of rich, natural beauty, boasting the world's largest mangrove forest and longest beach, lush coastal vegetation and exotic wildlife. It is also one of the most populated and poorest countries in the world. Annual flooding and cyclones often overshadow its abundant beauty and ancient roots.



### History

Although Bangladesh is a recently formed state (1971), it has roots in the ancient state of Banga and a written history of several thousand years. Bengal, the European name for the area, was part of the Indian empire under colonial rule until the region was partitioned in 1947, forming East and West Pakistan. Later in the century East Pakistan demanded regional autonomy and although those supporting autonomy were successful when the elections were held, the Pakistani government refused to recognise the election and in March 1971 sent in the army. This led to a war that lasted nine months; killing three million people and forcing a further ten million people to flee as refugees to India. With India's help the Pakistani army was defeated, East Pakistan became separate from Pakistan, and Bangladesh was born. What followed was 15 years of military rule to be replaced in 1990 by a democratic government. The poverty of people and country, political infighting, and coups and martial law, has meant life has not been easy. In spite of renewed political agitations in 1998 the country has managed to remain relatively stable politically.

### Current challenges

- ▶ As one of the most disaster-prone nations in the world, cyclones, flash floods, tidal surges, tornadoes and mudslides regularly claim many lives and destroy infrastructure.

- ▶ Around 45 per cent of the country's people live below the poverty line, with many living on less than 52p a day.
- ▶ In a 2005 Transparency International poll Bangladesh was ranked as most corrupt country in the world.

### BMS involvement in Bangladesh

BMS World Mission's involvement in what is now Bangladesh began in 1793 with William Carey. Today BMS works with the Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha (BBCS), which is responsible for work in the local churches, schools, medical and social work, leprosy care and the training of pastors. In recent years BMS volunteer workers, Action Teams and Medical Teams have worked in the country. BMS currently has one mission couple working long-term in Bangladesh. BMS is involved in the following projects:

#### The Christian Hospital, Chandraghona

Run by the Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha (BBCS), the hospital promotes total well-being in a hugely poor and malnourished region. BMS workers Leslie and Fiona Allan are working there as a project manager and nutritionist respectively.

#### The School for Blind Girls in Dhaka

Run by the BBCS, this is the first such school in the country.

#### The College of Christian Theology in Bangladesh (CCTB)

Originally started by BMS personnel, the college trains pastors and lay workers from many denominations, including the BBCS.

### Background Information

#### The land

Approximately 150 million people live in Bangladesh, a land smaller in area than England and Wales. It is one of the poorest countries in the world.

Located on the Padma river delta, Bangladesh is a fertile, alluvial plain where rice, tea and jute are grown. There are rainforests and swamps. Although the soil is rich, and sun and water plentiful, most people face economic hardship. This is in part due to the majority of the quality land being owned by a few large landowners.

A tropical monsoon climate predominates, with heavy summer rains from June to September, often accompanied by catastrophic cyclones and floods. Low quality coal and natural gas are the only mineral resources. Of growing concern is the ever-increasing pollution, indiscriminate fishing and deforestation. Millions of Bangladeshis are living under the risk of arsenic poisoning as the groundwater of a large region is contaminated with arsenic. Arsenic pollution causes serious health problems and environmental damage.

## Religion

Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country (85 per cent) with a Hindu population of about 14 per cent, and very small Christian minority (around 0.5 per cent). About 50 per cent of the Christian community is Roman Catholic.

Although Christians form a very small minority, their enormous impact on the country can be seen in the high quality of school and medical services they continue to provide. However, many Bangladeshis feel that it is not possible to be both a true Bangladeshi and a Christian, and there is continuing discrimination towards non-Muslims.

Baptists are the largest Protestant group and have been involved in Bangladesh since William Carey lived in the area before settling in Serampore, India. There are a number of Baptist groups and Baptist Unions present in Bangladesh.

## Prayer points

- ▶ Pray for the extensive work of the BCS that it would have a significant spiritual impact on the country.
- ▶ Pray for the Christian Hospital in Chandraghona, that sufficient funds and personnel will be available to continue the healthcare it provides to the poor and underprivileged.
- ▶ Pray that the message of love that is communicated through the high quality schools and medical services provided by Christians in Bangladesh will lead Bangladeshis to the giver of love – Jesus Christ.
- ▶ Pray for political stability in a nation that has suffered greatly at the hands of political conflict.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

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