

## BANGLADESHI LAW PROPOSES CHILD MARRIAGE IN 'SPECIAL CASES'

**NEW DELHI:** Bangladesh will be taking a step backwards in efforts to end child marriage if parliament approves changes to a law which would permit girls below 18 to be married in "special cases", a global alliance of charities said on Thursday. The poor South Asian nation has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, despite a three-decade-old law which bans marriage for girls under 18 and men under 21.

Girls Not Brides, a coalition of more than 650 charities, said Bangladesh's parliament was expected to consider the proposed change to the Child Marriage Restraint Act. This is expected to take place in the next session beginning Jan 22. Girls Not Brides in Bangladesh said the proposed change was

"alarming" and a step backwards for the country which has reduced child marriage in recent years.

"We have worked with thousands of girls who have been pulled out of education, married off early, bear the scars of early pregnancy, and forced to marry their abusers. This is simply unacceptable," said a spokesperson from the alliance's Bangladesh chapter in a statement.

The proposed law was open to abuse since it gave no definition of the term "special cases", Girls Not Brides said. Statements made by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina suggest exceptions would apply in instances of accidental pregnancy, or where a marriage would help to protect a girl's "honor" and the family's rep-

utation in this largely conservative society.

Bangladeshi officials were not immediately available for comment. Along with Niger, Guinea, South Sudan, Chad and Burkina Faso, Bangladesh is among the 10 worst countries for child marriage despite moves to strengthen law enforcement and toughen penalties against the crime.

In 2011, 32.5 percent of girls aged between 15 and 19 were married compared with 37.5 percent a decade before, said Girls Not Brides, citing data from Bangladesh's Bureau of Statistics.

Campaigners say girls face a greater risk of rape, domestic violence and forced pregnancies - which may put their lives in danger - as a result of being married as children. Child

brides are often denied the chance to go to school, are isolated from society and forced into a lifetime of economic dependence as a wife and mother.

Yet the practice continues largely due to a combination of social acceptance and government inaction, activists say. "Marriage before 18 does not ensure a pregnant girl's safety," said Lakshmi Sundaram, executive director for Girls Not Brides, said in the statement. "In reality it exposes her to the risk of sexual, physical and psychological violence."

"The progress Bangladesh has made to address child marriage is impressive, and reflects a real commitment from the highest levels of the government. Now is not the time to regress." — Reuters



**LAHORE:** In this photo taken on Thursday, civil society activists demanding recovery of the missing persons, in Lahore. The United States has expressed concern over the disappearance of five Pakistani anti-Taliban activists and bloggers who mysteriously went missing last week.—AP

## US CONCERNED OVER DISAPPEARANCE OF PAKISTANI ACTIVISTS

**ISLAMABAD:** The United States has expressed concern over the disappearance of five Pakistani anti-Taliban activists and bloggers who mysteriously went missing last week, incidents that have triggered an outcry from human right groups.

Dozens of activists rallied in the port city of Karachi for the second time late on Thursday, demanding the five men be accounted for. In Washington, State Department spokesman Mark Toner said the US is taking the disappearances "very seriously" and will "continue to monitor the situation in Pakistan."

Toner also welcomed a statement by Pakistan's interior ministry, which asked police to step up efforts to find the missing. Among the five are university professor Salman Haider, known for criticizing the Taliban and the government over its alleged inaction against militants, and Shiite activist Samar Abbas, who heads the Civil Progressive Alliance Pakistan.

No militant group has so far claimed abducting the activists and no government department or intelligence agency has said it detained or arrested any one of the five. Activist Syed Talib Abbas said yesterday that none of the missing men have been found so far. Haider's brother Zeeshan Haider said the family had not had any contact with him since he sent a text message to his wife's mobile phone last Friday, asking her to go to a roadside on Islamabad's outskirts and collect his car, which was found there. Pakistan's government has been under pressure since the activists disappeared, and the parliament has demanded an investigation. Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan promised the families of missing men that all efforts would be made to find them.

Benjamin Ismail, the Asia-Pacific head at Reporters Without Borders, on Friday said the disappearances were "shocking and extremely worrying" and urged authorities to determine the motives and bring those behind them to justice. — AP

## PAKISTAN MULLS WAYS TO CURB MISUSE OF BLASPHEMY LAWS

CRITICS SAY HUNDREDS FALSELY ACCUSED, OFTEN FROM MINORITIES

**ISLAMABAD:** A Pakistani Senate committee is set to debate how to prevent the country's blasphemy laws being applied unfairly, despite opposition from religious conservatives who support legislation that carries a mandatory death penalty for insulting Islam.

Senator Farhatullah Babar told Reuters that the Senate Committee on Human Rights, of which he is a member, will start discussions on blasphemy laws as early as next week, based on recommendations from a 24-year-old report. He said it would be the first time in decades that any parliamentary body had considered a formal proposal to stop the abuse of the blasphemy laws.

According to Babar, the committee would consider a proposal making it binding to investigate complaints before registering a case, to ensure "genuine blasphemy" had been committed and the law was not being used to settle scores, as critics say it is.

He also said the committee would debate whether life imprisonment was an adequate punishment, instead of the mandatory death penalty. Many conservatives in Pakistan consider even criticizing the laws as blasphemy, and in 2011 a Pakistani governor, Salman Taseer, was assassinated by his bodyguard after calling for reform of the laws. His killer was hailed as a hero by religious hardliners, and tens of thousands of supporters attended his funeral after he was executed last year.

If the committee makes any recommendations, it would be only the first step in a long process to bring about change in how the laws are enforced.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's office declined to comment on the Senate committee's moves. His party's support would be needed for any measures to move forward, and while legislation protecting women's rights has been passed and Sharif has reached out to minorities, it is unclear if he would risk a backlash over blasphemy.

### UNEARTHED REPORT

Hundreds of Pakistanis are on death row for blasphemy convictions, and at least 65 people, including lawyers, defendants and judges, have been murdered over blasphemy allegations since 1990, according to figures from the Center for Research and Security Studies

based in the capital Islamabad. Pakistan's religious and political elites almost universally steer clear of speaking against blasphemy laws, but a small group of lawmakers has been looking for ways to reduce abuses. Babar said the Human Rights Committee hit a "gold mine" when he discovered a 24-year-old Senate report that called for a more specific definition of blasphemy and said further debate was needed on whether expunging "imprisonment of life" from an earlier law had been correct.

"So we convinced other senators that here we have a chance, we have a starting point, we have this report in hand. Let's debate it and see how we can prevent abuse of this law," Babar said.

However, powerful religious conservatives who have millions of followers strongly support the laws. Tahir Ashrafi, head of the influential Pakistan Ulema Council of Muslim clerics, said it would oppose any change. "Make new laws to punish those who abuse blasphemy laws," Ashrafi told Reuters. "But no one can even think about changing this law."

### "FIRMER STANCE"

Last week, Pakistani police arrested 150 headline activists rallying in support of the blasphemy laws on the anniversary of the assassination of Taseer, the Punjab governor shot dead by his bodyguard for calling for reform. Police have also resisted a demand by hardliners to register a blasphemy case against Shaan Taseer, the slain governor's son, over a Christmas message calling for prayers for those charged under the "inhumane" legislation. "This government has shown a firmer stance than the government when my father was martyred," Shaan Taseer said. But public opinion remains a major obstacle to reform. On the outskirts of Islamabad, thousands still visit the shrine of Mumtaz Qadri, executed last February for Taseer's murder.

The large shrine, with a glass roof and shiny marble floors, was built over his grave days after the burial. Taxi driver Waheed Gul says he has come to the shrine every day since it was built: "What better way to spend my days than to pray every day at the grave of someone who sent a blasphemer to hell?" — Reuters



**GUWAHATI:** An Indian villager displays his catch during a community fishing as part of Bhogali Bihu celebrations in Panbari village, some 50 kilometers (31 miles) east of Guwahati. "Bhogali Bihu" marks the end of the harvest season in the northeastern state of Assam. —AP