



## ○ discovering BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is a densely populated country, highly prone to natural disasters – and almost half of the population lives on less than one dollar a day. Formerly East Pakistan, Bangladesh came into being only in 1971, when the two parts of Pakistan split after a bitter war that drew in neighboring India. Bangladesh spent 15 years under military rule. In 1990, democracy was restored, but the political scene remains volatile.

Bangladesh is located on the biggest river delta in the world where the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers come together and empty into the Bay of Bengal. The geographical setting of the country – the lofty Himalayas in the north and the funnel-shaped Bay of Bengal in the south – makes Bangladesh vulnerable to natural disasters like floods, cyclones and droughts.

Bangladesh is densely populated. About 164 million people live here, three-quarters of them in rural areas. More than 14 million people live in the capital, Dhaka, about one-third of them in urban slums. Income distribution is uneven, with 40 percent of the population living below the absolute poverty line. Poverty is very evident in the city slums, but much is hidden in the countryside. A number of minority ethnic groups live in the fringes of the country.

Bangladesh means “Country of Bengalis.” Bangla (also known as Bengali) is the official language, spoken by more than 99 percent of the population.

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Note: Recognizing that information on Bangladesh is readily available on the Internet, we encourage you to learn as much as you can about the political background, history, geography, economics and culture of this amazing country. This document provides a general overview, with some specific information that will help short-term teams appreciate Bangladesh even more and understand our work. Going to Bangladesh as part of a short-term team is different from a leisure trip or traveling for business. The information provided here can help you prepare for a potentially life-changing experience. Sources used for some country facts include CIA: The World Factbook and BBC News.



## GOVERNMENT, ECONOMICS & POLITICS

Bangladesh was founded as a democratic state. In practice, however, democracy has been very fragile as evidenced by a number of assassinations, periods of military rule and continuing political turmoil. Corruption is widespread, and people do not expect the rule of law to protect them or their rights against people with power.

The economy is heavily dependent on overseas aid, remittances from overseas workers and a garment export industry. Recent years have seen economic growth. However, this growth struggles to keep pace with the population and is hampered by corruption and lawlessness.



## THE CHURCH AND RELIGION

Islam is the largest religion of Bangladesh, followed by Hinduism. Though Islam is the predominant religion, Bangladeshis are also influenced by the broader culture of caste, patronage and status. This creates a society structure that is dominated by men.

Christians account for approximately 0.3 percent of the total population. Christians are minorities within minorities, and there is often a tendency to focus on preserving identity rather than reaching out. Religious belief is largely about the hereafter with little application to service and outreach.

The language of Bangla Bibles and of the established church comes from the Hindu Sanskrit, which is not received by Muslims who are used to Arabic religious language. Recently, some mission organizations switched their focus to reaching the majority community. In 2000, a Bible version in the language commonly spoken by the majority of the people was published.

Estimates of the number of Muslims and Hindus who have become Christians are hard to make, but 20,000 out of 100 million is a credible figure. Few are connected to the traditional church, and many choose to remain “underground” because to declare their faith in Jesus openly would result in separation from all family and social relationships and loss of employment.

For most educated people, religion is a private affair. Christian organizations are tolerated provided they do not confront Islam directly.



## EDUCATION

In theory, primary education is compulsory and freely provided by the government to all. In practice, attendance and completion rates are low, and the quality of education generally poor. Teaching is focused on rote memorization to pass exams, with a flourishing private coaching sector that provides a major income source for poorly paid teachers.

Secondary and tertiary education are also by rote learning and are exam-focused. There is a national curriculum that includes religious education in the child’s own religion. Functional literacy is still very poor – even among those who have attended school.



### QUICK FACTS

**Full Name:** People's Republic of Bangladesh

**Population:** 164.4 million (UN, 2010)

**Capital and Largest City:** Dhaka

**Area:** 143,998 sq km (55,598 sq miles)

**Major Language:** Bengali

**Major Religions:** Islam, Hinduism

**Life Expectancy:** 67 years (men), 69 years (women) (UN)

**Monetary Currency:** Taka

**Main Exports:** Garments, fish, jute goods, leather products

**GNI Per Capita:** US \$590 (World Bank, 2009)



### WEATHER

Bangladesh is a land of heavy monsoon rains, with a hot and rainy summer and a dry and cool winter. January is the coolest month with temperatures averaging 68 F. April is the warmest month with temperatures ranging up to 86 F. The monsoon season usually starts in April and lasts until mid-October.

Bengali tradition divides the year into six seasons: summer, rainy, early autumn, late autumn, winter and spring. However, four seasons are clearly distinguishable: summer, rainy, late autumn (when harvesting takes place) and winter. Rains begin in April. It is then that farmers start tilling their land for early crop.

### VACCINATION INFORMATION

In addition to applying for a passport, you will also need to research vaccinations for your trip well in advance as some vaccinations take time or need to be given in a series to be effective. The best advice regarding vaccinations and any other medications can only come from a qualified physician. Please make an appointment with your family doctor and share with him/her where you are going, how long you will be there and what activities you will be participating in. In consultation with your doctor, you can decide which vaccinations and/or medications will be best for you.

To better familiarize yourself with travel health, please visit the Center for Disease Control's website at [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://www.cdc.gov/travel) prior to your visit with your doctor.



### LUGGAGE

Luggage should be limited to one checked bag and the allowed carry-on for each team member. While most airlines will allow two checked bags, large amounts of luggage are difficult to transport while in-country. Any extra bags should be used to transport ministry supplies. Please refer to your teams training materials for a packing list.

### CLOTHING

Our dress code is a sign of respect for the people you will be working with, as well as to convey a conservative Christian lifestyle.



In Bangladesh, both men and women tend to dress conservatively. Dress modestly in all public locations in accordance with the culture.

A sweater or jacket is recommended especially for visits in November through February. Most Bangladeshis wear sandals because of the heat and rain, and you will find this especially appropriate during the monsoon season. Streets often flood and your trail will be muddy. Sandals are also recommended because you will often take off your shoes to enter homes and other places. Bring an umbrella if you will arrive during the monsoon season.

### FOR WOMEN

Wearing appropriate clothing will make a huge difference between being accepted by people and able to build relationships, or being regarded as an object to stare at. When staying in a conference center with other foreigners, women can wear modest western dress, but should wear shalwar kamees when outside (and may find it better to just wear it all the time).

Shalwar kamees come in three parts – long, loose trousers covering the ankles; a knee-length tunic (either in short or long sleeves) with slits at the sides up to the hip; and a very large scarf to drape over your upper body, or your head in some situations. FH/Bangladesh will arrange for women to purchase shalwar kamees. Simple ones cost between \$5 and \$15. They are very light-weight, colorful and fun to wear!

### FOR MEN

For men, clothing is not a big issue. Light shirts and slacks are the norm. Do not wear shorts or sleeveless T-shirts. Short-sleeved T-shirts are okay for casual wear, but would be considered too informal for the office or a field visit.

### ELECTRONICS

You may bring cameras, (disposable, standard or digital), iPods, cell phones and other small electronic devices; however, you assume all risks to damage, loss or theft of your belongings. Keep in mind that you will be kept quite busy, and there will not be a lot of time to use many electronic devices. Also, electricity may not always be available to recharge electronic equipment, including cameras and camcorders. Please bring extra batteries. When in public, don't display expensive electronic items or any items that may just appear expensive.



**Note:** Ready-made shalwar kamees are only available up to about a U.S. size 14. It is very easy and equally inexpensive to purchase fabric and tailor-make larger shalwar kamees; however, this takes a bit more time. If a short-term team member will need a larger size, it is recommended that the leader inform FHUS two months prior to arrival who will in turn contact FH/Bangladesh. Either it will be made ahead of time according to measurements, or arrangements will be made with a tailor who can quickly make one on a short notice. Also, women over 5'8" tall may want to bring their own pair of lightweight, loose-fitting trousers in a neutral shade to serve as a backup in case there are no long-enough shalwar to be found. Jeans are not recommended.

Out of respect for cultural sensitivity, we request your cooperation in submitting to FH's policy in regard to piercings, tattoos and radical haircuts. For more details about this topic, please talk to your team leader.

### PHOTO POLICY

All photos or videos should be taken with utmost discretion. Upon arrival in the country, your Team Coordinator will explain the country's photo policy.

### SOME CONSIDERATIONS

Make sure the focus is on relationships and the ministry, not pictures. When possible, ask before taking pictures.

Designate a photographer. Rather than taking the same picture on 12





different cameras, take the picture with one or two cameras and share when you get back. Be sure that any picture you take conveys dignity for the person in the picture. If you will not remember the names of the people in the story or the significance of the photo, re-consider the need for taking a photo.

### FOOD

Your Team Coordinator will have arranged breakfast, lunch and dinner for your team. You will have the opportunity to sample a variety of food while in Bangladesh, both traditional Bangladeshi dishes and some American favorites. While some dishes may be unfamiliar, please come with an open mind and be willing to try what the designated cooks have prepared for you.

Avoid eating foods that have not been provided or approved by Food for the Hungry staff. Eating something from a local vendor or street market could lead to sickness.

If you have any food allergies or special dietary needs, please communicate those to FH/US ahead of time. Our field staff will need time to arrange other options for you.

Your Team Coordinator will also have a supply of bottled water for your team. Drink bottled water only. Also use it to brush your teeth and take medicines. If you are served ice in a drink, please verify that the water is okay by consulting with your Team Coordinator.

### TRANSPORTATION

Your Team Coordinator will have arranged transportation the entire time your team is serving with Food for the Hungry. In Bangladesh, most travel is done using FH vans; thus, guests rarely need to walk long distances. Still, village roads and paths can be uneven, and even in the city it can feel like an Olympic sport to just walk down the road a bit. One must be able to dodge rickshaws, potholes and a dense mass of people passing by. Rickshaws and baby taxis are abundant, but only occasionally used during short visits.

Driving in Bangladesh may be a new experience for you. Remember that you are in good hands. Your driver is a professional and used to the traffic conditions. Keep your hands, feet and belongings inside the vehicle at all times. If you experience carsickness, sit in the front or take an appropriate medicine for motion sickness.

### COMMUNICATION

You will likely be without telephone and/or e-mail access during your time in Bangladesh. While these services may be readily available, especially in a major city like Dhaka, your schedule will be packed with



activities. This will help you to focus your energy and attention on the transformative work of the Lord and to help maintain a cohesive group dynamic. We encourage you to leave your cell phone at home and inform your family and friends that you will be unavailable until you return to the States.

If there is an emergency in the country or community where you are serving, your Team Coordinator will contact your family and appropriate people at your home church. Before you leave the U.S. you will be given a U.S. phone number and other details, which you will pass on to your family and close friends. If there is an emergency in the U.S. while you're on the field, your family member or friend may call that number. Your Field Liaison will assess the call and facilitate communication with you or the field staff as necessary.

### MONEY

While with Food for the Hungry, all transportation, food, lodging and water are covered by FH. You will only need money for souvenirs and shopping that you will do in-country and while traveling. A suggested amount for this purpose is \$100 to \$200.

It is advisable to bring cash as U.S. dollars are widely accepted at currency exchange locations. FH/Bangladesh staff will assist you with exchanging money. Bring bills larger than \$20 and be sure that the bills are crisp and new (no more than 5 years old) to ensure acceptance.



### Miscellaneous

**Time:** Standard time of Bangladesh is six hours ahead of GMT. Friday and Saturday are weekly government holidays, while private offices and enterprises observe Friday as a weekly day-off and are open on Saturday. Office hours are from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

**Electricity:** 220 volts A.C. in all cities and towns.

**Weights and Measures:** Metric

### Additional Articles, Links and Resources

[www.bangladoot.org/aboutbangladesh.asp](http://www.bangladoot.org/aboutbangladesh.asp)



### FOOD FOR THE HUNGRY/BANGLADESH

Food for the Hungry/Bangladesh is almost as old as Bangladesh, which became an independent nation in 1971. FH was formally recognized as an organization operating in Bangladesh on June 13, 1972.

Initially, FH's work in Bangladesh was exactly as its name suggests – distributing food to hungry people, survivors of war and famine. Over the years, as Bangladesh progressed, FH's work also transitioned from rehabilitation and support to education and sustainable development. FH's work has covered many parts of the country. FH staff have reflected the religious and ethnic diversity of the country, displaying tolerance and cooperation and reaching out to culturally disadvantaged groups.

The FH/Bangladesh staff has always been predominantly Bangladeshi. Expatriates from





Japan, Korea, U.S., Australia and Europe have worked alongside them. In 2002, FH/Bangladesh started training all staff in FH vision, mission and values. This resulted in significant staff growth, development and alignment with God's vision for FH.



### **SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

The Family and Community Transformation (FCT) is the main focus of work in Bangladesh through which FH helps develop the social and economic capacity of the poorest and most disadvantaged groups. The goals are (1) to see people grow in their confidence to change their own lives for the better, (2) learn and embrace biblical values that make for a productive and supportive society, and (3) equip and empower people to build a sustainable future and be responsible for their own progress and development.

At the core of FCT are groups of community members who are learning and saving together. On the foundations of regular savings, literacy training and math training, FCT participants build group solidarity, income generation activities and knowledge and skills that improve health and social conditions.

A trusting relationship grows, enabling FH staff to share biblical values and beliefs in a non-threatening way. There is a strong emphasis on leadership development from the beginning. Groups appoint chairmen, secretaries and cashiers as well as health and law leaders. All these people receive training on group dynamics and leadership development and quickly take on roles in groups so that the staff's involvement is minimized.

In the FCT program, the economic component is built entirely on the participants' own savings. It takes some time to build savings, but during this time they develop the habit and they discover that by making small investments, their money can grow. All this money is the participants' own – held in their own group bank accounts. FH staff do not touch the group's money, and the funds do not show in FH's own accounts. Participants learn to monitor and audit their finances.

The FCT has a well-planned lifespan, where within 10-12 years, communities form and manage independent Community Based Organizations (CBOs). As a result, FH is able to step back as CBOs continue the work of community development.