Bangladesh Praised for Reducing Acid Attacks

By Karsten Strauss
WeNews correspondent
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Bangladesh is singled out from neighboring India and Cambodia for taking stronger measures to stop acid attacks on women in a report released Thursday. The attacks to disfigure and isolate victims are called acts of gender terrorism.

In a study of the crime in Bangladesh, Cambodia and India, researchers found that Bangladesh had taken the most proactive approach to decreasing the attacks by enacting legislation, a no-bail policy for perpetrators and forming a national council to regulate corrosive solutions and enact a policy of treatment and rehabilitation for victims.

Whether the attacks follow a perceived wrongdoing or are simply the response of a spurned suitor, thousands of women in the South Asian region around Bangladesh have had sulphuric acid sprayed or poured onto their faces, eliminating facial features, causing blindness and fusing skin together, forcing them into a life of health problems and social isolation.

"This is a form of gender terrorism, I believe," Cornell International Human Rights Clinic Director Sital Kalantry said Thursday at New York City's Cornell Club in an event discussing the findings in advance of its official publication.

The study is based on two years of on-the-ground research and fact-finding conducted by four New York-based groups: Kalantry's Human Rights Clinic; Cornell Law School's Avon Global Center for Women and Justice; the New York City Bar Association; and the Virtue Foundation, which acts in a consultative capacity to the United Nations on global health care, education and empowerment initiatives. It was funded by a grant from the Avon Global Center for Women and Justice.

Difficulties in Enforcement
Bangladesh's women have yet to feel the full benefit of the new laws and policies. The density of the population in Bangladesh combined with a relative scarcity of police officers hinders investigations and prosecutions.

In Bangladesh, in the years between 2000 and 2009, there were 2,198 reported attacks but only 439 convictions, according to the study. However, the attacks in Bangladesh have waned, falling steadily from 367 in 2002 to 116 in 2009.

Producers of the report, entitled "Combating Acid Violence in Bangladesh, India and Cambodia," call it the first comprehensive study of the use of acids to maim, disfigure and punish women.
A search of Indian newspapers by the researchers found 153 reported cases in India between January 2002 and October 2010 and the Cambodian Acid Survivors Charity has counted 271 acid violence victims treated in hospitals in Cambodia between 1985 and 2010.

These figures from the report may not tell the whole story, as records of such assaults in these nations are not always kept and the crimes themselves are sometimes not reported, Kalantry said.

Looking Forward
In the next year the producers of the report plan to offer technical assistance based on data from the report and advice on what to do moving forward to governmental representatives of Cambodia, Bangladesh and India, should they ask for it, to help confront and change the culture of acid attacks, Kalantry said.

Kalantry is currently planning a forum to be held in New Delhi, India, in October where various women's health and rights nongovernmental organizations and possibly government representatives from the three nations studied--where acid attacks are relatively prevalent--can compare strategies and successes.

Victims often become social pariahs as some communities see them as bad omens. "Unlike rape, which can be hidden, this is on a woman's face," Kalantry said.

Corporations who produce or use acids in their products will also be recruited to help end the violence. Avon Executive Director Sara Lulo said at the Thursday event that the acids are readily available in Bangladesh, India and Cambodia and are used as cleaning products, in dyes for clothing and in batteries.

Better labeling of receptacles in which acids are sold could make a difference, Lulo said, which gives producers of the chemicals a way to join the fight against acid attacks.


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For more information:
"Combating Acid Violence in Bangladesh, India, and Cambodia" report:

In other parts of India, hot cooking oil is used in the same way and has been a tradition for many years to punish young wives, sometimes with the purpose of killing them with so much hot or burning cooking oil that the person’s skin injuries are too much for the body to sustain, sometimes to send them away through this message that they are not doing well according to the husband or his family. All these practices are barbaric and need huge international attention such as this article by Ms. Strauss in Womenenews.