

Karnataka State Most Dangerous for Christians in India

✖ With at least 43 incidents of anti-Christian violence, Karnataka saw more attacks on Christians in the first eight months of this year than any other state in India, according to advocacy organizations.

The figure compares with 35 attacks on churches, worship services and Christians during the same period last year in the state, which has become the center of violence against Christians. The states with the next highest incidents of anti-Christian violence from January through August this year were Andhra Pradesh with 14 and Madhya Pradesh with 11, according to figures from the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) and the All India Christian Council.

Former Chief Minister of Karnataka H.D. Kumaraswamy on Sept. 11 called on Gov. H.R. Bhardwaj to rein in abuses by the state's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government to ensure that law and order is maintained, reported the GCIC. In several districts of Karnataka during the first eight months of the year, local authorities allowed Hindu extremists to beat pastors, disrupt prayer meetings and worship services, and burn, vandalize, demolish or shut down prayer halls.

After August last year the number of violent incidents against Christians in Karnataka raced up, with a total of 112 attacks on Christians in 2008, and the Christian community fears a repeat of hostilities.

Kumaraswamy noted that a Sept. 10 attack on St. Francis De Sales Church at Hebbagudi, on the outskirts of Bangalore, came just days after Gov. Bhardwaj voiced concern over the security of minorities in the state. Armed attackers broke into the

church, damaged statues and other items, smashed windows and destroyed a house behind the building, according to the Evangelical Fellowship of India. Church damages were estimated at 200,000 rupee, or \$4,173.

"It is unfortunate that the government did not take any action to curb communal menace even after your caution," Kumaraswamy wrote in a memorandum to the governor, adding that Gov. Bhardwaj was constitutionally bound to stop state security personnel from violating the law.

The former chief minister said he felt that the attack on the church, located close to the Hebbagudi police station on a busy road, reflected growing religious intolerance and tension in the state, and he criticized Home Minister V.S. Acharya for terming the attack a "minor incident."

Archbishop of Bangalore Bernard Moras told Compass that past experience leaves him little hope for future justice.

"The state government has promised to make an immediate inquiry into the recent church attack in Hebbagudi, but nothing has been done so far, and we have no results whatsoever from the Justice B.K. Somashekar Commission of Inquiry made into church attacks last year," he said. "Sad as it is, we feel that justice delayed is justice denied."

Former chief minister Kumaraswamy has demanded a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into attacks on prayer halls in the state. The leader of the opposition in the state Legislative Assembly, Siddaramaiah (who goes by a single name), has also demanded a CBI inquiry into all attacks on minorities and places of worship. The Hindu reported that he had asked state Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa to stop blaming others for the mistakes of his government.

Siddaramaiah told media on Sept. 13 that members of the Hindu extremist Sangh Parivar were involved in the attacks on churches.

"The BJP government led by B.S. Yeddyurappa has failed to take action against those involved in these incidents that created unrest in society, and now the chief minister is blaming others for the mistakes committed by his government, which has resulted in a law-and-order problem in the state," he said.

The Hindu reported Siddaramaiah as saying that in an effort to cover up their mistakes, the chief minister and his cabinet dismissed the accusations as efforts to topple his government.

"If the chief minister has any proof to support his statements, let him hand over the issue to the CBI," Siddaramaiah added. "The truth will be out."

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also recently remarked that Karnataka has witnessed a number of incidents of communal violence this year.

"What is more worrisome is that the incidents were not limited to one or two districts," Singh said in comments that Chief Minister Yedduyurappa brushed off as untrue; the chief minister referred to the violence as a "few stray incidents" that were "blown out of proportion."

Tensions are high in the districts of Davangere, Mangalore, Bangalore, and also potentially volatile are the districts of Chickmagalur, Chitradurga, Belgaum, Tumkur, Udupi, Shimoga, Bagalkot, Dharwad and Kodagu, reported the GCIC.

Chief Minister Yeddyurappa reportedly has instructed police to provide security at all religious venues and directed them to take steps to take preventative measures. City Police Commissioner Shankar Bidari has reportedly said the chief minister ordered security officers to deal sternly with those involved in incidents of religious violence.

The Bangalore Rural police on Sept. 12 reportedly handed over the investigation of the attack on St. Francis De Sales to the Criminal Investigation Department.

Attempted Anti-Conversion Law

Foremost among priorities of the Hindu nationalist BJP when it came to power in Karnataka last year was to introduce the kind of “anti-conversion” law that has provided the pretext for anti-Christian violence in other states.

Alarmed by what they said was an increase in conversions to Christianity, six prominent Hindu leaders on June 25 said that they had urged Chief Minister Yedduyurappa to introduce “anti-conversion” laws similar to those of Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, reported The Hindu. Passage of an anti-conversion bill has been left hanging, however, with negative publicity over communal violence and Christian protests against such a bill.

Such laws are designed to thwart forcible or fraudulent conversion, but they are popularly misunderstood as criminalizing conversion in general. The laws seek to curb religious conversions made by “force, fraud or allurement,” but human rights groups say they obstruct conversion generally as Hindu nationalists invoke them to harass Christians with spurious arrests and incarcerations

Anti-conversion laws are in force in five states – Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat – and its implementation is awaited in the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Rajasthan. Several cases against Christians have been filed under various anti-conversion laws in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Orissa, but no one has been convicted in more than four decades since such laws were enacted.

Naveen Kumar of the Federation of Christian Churches and Organizations told Compass that Christians from different districts in Karnataka have come out in protest against such a bill since August of 2008. The Christians believe that the passing of an anti-conversion bill in the state would heighten atrocities against them.

Of the 52.8 million people in Karnataka, Christians number slightly more than 1 million.