

Radical Hindus Still Threatening Christians in India with Death

Two months of violence against Christians in India is drawing international attention and calls for government intervention.



[] Two months after bloody anti-Christian attacks broke out in India's eastern state of Orissa fearful local Protestant and Catholic villagers told the Associated Press (AP) they're still repeatedly threatened by Hindu extremists to abandon Christianity and convert to Hinduism.

Although the All India Christian Council (AICC) reports that violence has subsided in Orissa since Oct. 14, fear among Christians is still palpable. According to the AP, on a nearly daily basis the unrest has continued: a house burned; a carload of people beaten; a soldier hacked to death.

A pastor in Orissa, who for security reasons asked to remain anonymous, told *Charisma* that 40,000 Christians in Orissa are hiding out in forests, unable to return to their villages, and thousands more are staying in refugee camps. "If they return to their villages, they have to become Hindus," he said. "Otherwise they will be chased away or killed."

Some international observers have implied that India's government is not doing enough to protect its minority Christian population in Orissa.

Last week, addressing a crowd gathered in St. Peter's Square for his weekly blessing, *Pope Benedict XVI* singled out the governments of India and Iraq to protect its minority Christians suffering persecution.

"They are not asking for privileges, but desire only to be able to continue to live in their country together with their

fellow citizens," the pope said, according to Reuters. "[I] call the attention of the international community [to this tragedy]...where Christians are victims of intolerance and cruel violence."

Sources inside India representing the AICC recently told *Charisma* that rural-based police are ignoring India's Supreme Court mandate to register all complaints and are turning away Christians attempting to report cases of violence perpetrated by Hindu extremists.

The violence against Christians erupted in Orissa on Aug. 24, a day after Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati, Kandhamal district leader of the militant nationalist group Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), was gunned down with four of his comrades.

Maoist rebels took responsibility for the assassinations but Hindu radicals blamed Christians for the attack and used the killing to incite violence against them. The violence has continued unabated since then, with dozens of Christians killed, hundreds of churches destroyed and thousands of Christians' homes burned.

The Evangelical Fellowship of India reported that in Orissa's Kandhamal district, militants gang-raped a nun, stripped the priest naked and beat him brutally.

The violence remains most severe in Orissa, but the attacks have spread to several other states, including Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand. Observers say the attacks stem from the recent rise of Hindu nationalist movements, including the militant Bajrang Dal and VHP, which want to see India maintain a Hindu identity.

Bridget S. Kustin, representing the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, said Christians should urge their representatives in Congress to support resolutions that condemn the anti-Christian violence in India and call on India's government to intervene.

"India is invested in its international image, so pressure

coming from abroad will have an impact," Kustin said. "[Christians] can make sure there is continual international pressure."