

Violence Continues in India

At least 60 people have died in the unabated, anti-Christian violence that broke out in August.



[] The violence against Christians in India is headed into its eighth week despite the deployment of thousands of national and state law enforcement troops. According to local sources representing the All India Christian Council (AICC), countless rural-based police officers have ignored 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 death tolls are climbing, but less than 100 are confirmed," pastor and AICC Regional Secretary Madhu Chandra said. "Perhaps this is why the Orissa attacks haven't gained international attention [regarding] the worst violation of the freedom of religion in any democracy in recent history. ... This is clearly terrorism and ethnic cleansing, but few Indian leaders are admitting it."

At least 60 people have died since the violence broke out in Orissa state 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. Saraswati is believed to have instigated the violence last December that reportedly destroyed 105 churches and 730 Christian homes.

Maoist rebels took responsibility for the assassinations, and the AICC immediately published a letter denouncing the murders. But Hindu radicals still blamed Christians for the attack and used the killing to incite violence against them. The violence has continued unabated since then, with hundreds of churches destroyed and thousands of Christians' homes burned.

"The Hindu militants are afraid because many thousands of ordinary Hindus are accepting the Lord as their savior," wrote an Orissa pastor who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisal in an update to his ministry's overseers. "Christianity in India is [growing] ... and this alarms the Hindu militants who think that one day India will become a Christian nation."

The pastor said the central government has done little to stop the violence. Dead bodies dot the roadside, he said, and many Christians have fled to the forest. "They have nothing now," he said. "Everything has been burned down by the wicked people. Hundreds of Christian villages have been deserted."

The Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) reported that in Orissa's Kandhamal district, militants gang-raped a nun, stripped the priest naked and beat him brutally. They then attempted to make him a human torch, but their matches, dampened by the rain, did not light. Police arrived in time to save the two.

In Tiangia village, also in Orissa, four men attempting to defend their church against attackers were killed, and one of them reportedly was cut into pieces, local media reported. As the terrorists burned houses of Christians, a paralyzed man, unable to escape, was burned to death.

At a Catholic-run orphanage, a mob locked the priest and a 20-year-old female nurse in separate rooms and set the building on fire. The priest survived, but the young woman burned to death. Ten of the orphans fled to the jungle, while 12 suffered burns.

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. Archbishop of Delhi Vincent Concessao has called for the Bajrang Dal and the VHP to be banned, saying the extremist groups wanted to eliminate Christians from Orissa, Tribune News Service reported.

Although many of the early attacks were against prominent Catholic ministries, Christians of all denominational backgrounds have been affected, as well as Hindus who refuse to join in the attacks, Compass Direct News reported. The EFI listed more than 30 affected ministries, including the Assemblies of God, Believers Church (Gospel for Asia), the Indian Pentecostal Church and the

Orissa Missionary Movement.

“Outside the metropolitan areas of Bangalore and Mangalore, innocent Christians live in fear since coordinated attacks on churches on Sept. 14,” said John Dayal, AICC secretary general. “Police are ordering village churches not to hold Sunday worship services and even requiring them to submit ‘licenses’ to hold prayers.”

According to Compass Direct, more than 300 people had been arrested in the last month. Christian leaders attributed the arrest of 46 people within two days last week to the new state Director General of Police Manmohan Praharaj, who succeeded Gopal Chandra Nanda after he retired on Sept. 30. The AICC reported that 315 villages have been damaged, 4,640 Christian houses burned, 149 churches destroyed and 53,000 Christians left homeless as a result of the violence. Christian organizations and human rights have staged protests and organized prayer efforts, calling for an end to the violence. In late September, five U.S. representatives, led by Republican Rep. Todd Akin of Missouri, introduced a resolution condemning the violence in India and calling on the Indian government to stop the attacks and address its root causes.

Bridget S. Kustin, communications specialist for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, said Christians should urge their congressional representatives to support the resolution, which was referred to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, and call for a similar measure to be

introduced in the
Senate.

“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.”

In the meantime, Christians are urged to pray for believers in India. “We covet your earnest prayers for the state of Orissa,” the Orissa pastor said.

“Please stand with the bleeding church in Orissa, India.”

—John M.
Lindner

Comment