

India's Anti-Christian Violence in 2008 Linked to Terrorists

Right-wing terrorists played a key role in attacking and killing Christians in Orissa and Karnataka states in 2008, one of the Hindu extremist suspects in anti-Muslim bomb blasts has told investigators. The information is leading to renewed demands for a probe by India's anti-terror agency.

Pragya Singh Thakur, arrested for planning 2008 bombings targeting Muslims in west India, told the National Investigation Agency (NIA) that Lt. Col. Prasad Srikant Purohit had "masterminded" the 2008 anti-Christian violence in Orissa and Karnataka, The Indian Express daily reported on Wednesday (March 23). Purohit is accused along with Thakur for the 2008 bombings of Muslims.

Thakur had met with Purohit after the August 2008 Kandhamal attacks against Christians began and told her "he was into big things like blasts, etc., and had masterminded the Orissa and Karnataka 'disturbances,'" the national daily reported.

The NIA, a recently formed agency to prevent, probe and prosecute terrorism-related incidents on a national scale, is investigating several cases involving right-wing terrorism aimed at the Muslim minority in retaliation for Islamist attacks. Both Thakur, formerly a member of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's student wing, and Purohit, who was serving in the Indian Army when he was arrested for his role in blasts in Malegaon city in western Maharashtra state, were part of the Hindu extremist Abhinav Bharat.

Thakur's statement to the NIA came soon after a Directorate of Military Intelligence report said Purohit had confessed to

having killed at least two Christians in Kandhamal and playing a role in violence in Karnataka and other states.

The revelation by Thakur was not surprising, says John Dayal, secretary general of the All India Christian Council.

"We have held that the military precision of the Kandhamal riots, which spread fast and raged for months, could not be a work of mere common people, and that higher brains were at work to 'teach the Christians a lesson' while sending out signals of their power lust to the entire nation," Dayal told Compass.

The violence in Kandhamal began following the assassination of a Hindu extremist leader Laxmanananda Saraswati on Aug. 23, 2008. Though Maoists claimed responsibility for the murder, Hindu extremists blamed Christians for it. The violence began after the arrival of Indresh Kumar, an executive committee member of the Hindu extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and a suspect in blast cases, says Kandhamal activist Ajay Singh. Local media reports said Kumar was part of Saraswati's funeral procession, which was designed to trigger the attacks, Singh adds.

The RSS denies having played any role in terrorism. On March 12, Ram Madhav, an RSS national executive committee member, called the allegation against Kumar "a concerted political campaign." Those who were dragging the RSS leader into blast cases "will stand thoroughly exposed," *The Times of India* daily quoted him as saying.

Dayal and another Christian leader, Joseph Dias, said they had separately written to India's prime minister and home minister seeking inclusion of the anti-Christian attacks in an ongoing NIA investigation. Sajan K. George of the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) said he had petitioned the president for the same.

Dias, general secretary of the Catholic-Christian Social

Forum, a Maharashtra-based rights group, recalled that violence in Kandhamal spread across 13 other districts of Orissa.

"In Kandhamal alone, more than 6,600 homes were destroyed, 56,000 people rendered homeless, thousands injured, and about 100 men and women [were] burned alive or hacked to death," Dias says. "Among the women raped was a Catholic nun."

In September 2008, as the violence continued in Kandhamal, a series of attacks on Christians and their property rocked Mangalore city in Karnataka state.

"In Karnataka, it was hundreds of churches that were desecrated, Christians brutally beaten up, over 350 false cases foisted on them, property held by the community taken over, and no relief to date [has been] received," Dias says.

While the government of Orissa downplayed the violence as "ethnic tensions," Karnataka officials blamed it on Christian conversions.

The RSS and outfits linked to it such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) and the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram, which claims to work for tribal welfare, facilitated the Kandhamal attacks together with alleged Hindu nationalist terrorists, Dayal says.

"We want the truth about Hindu groups' anti-national terror activities against minority Christians to come out," says George, whose GCIC is based in Karnataka.

Dias warned that that the latest statement by Thakur must not to be seen in isolation, as the Military Intelligence report revealed that the Abhinav Bharat had targeted Christians in several states, including Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra.

The "game plan" is to "cripple Christian religious places, property and institutions, besides eliminating its nascent

community leadership at the grassroots,” Dias adds.

The Abhinav Bharat was formed in 2007 by a few right-wing Hindus allegedly disillusioned with the leaders of the Hindu nationalist movement, whom they thought were too timid to make India a Hindu nation, rather than one based on religious pluralism.