

Attack on Indian Revival Meeting Sends Christians Underground

As police looked on, militants attacked a Christian church in central India earlier this month, causing severe injuries to some and sending the pastor into hiding, according to witnesses.

The assault took place during the second day of a Feb. 7-9 revival meeting at India Christian Assembly of God Church in the city of Rajnandgaon, about 72 kilometers west of Raipur, the capital of the mostly rural, and overwhelmingly Hindu, state of Chhattisgarh.

The revival meeting included a graduation ceremony of 14 students who attended a short bible training program. Around 300 Christians had gathered to witness the ceremony and attend the revival meeting, coming from the neighboring states of Maharashtra, West Bengal, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh.

"Everything went well on the first day of the meeting until the afternoon of the second day," a witness told World Watch Monitor. The witness asked not to be named in order to avoid retribution from the attackers.

At about 3 p.m., a group of more than 30 young men disrupted the meeting and started to interrogate the pastor, Thomas Abraham, and other church leaders, who protested the interruption.

The witness said the intruders were from several Hindu nationalist groups, including Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena and Dharma Sena.

"They started to manhandle and beat people, tear Bibles, abused the God of Christians and strode over children," the witness said. More attackers joined in, their faces covered, and armed with sticks and iron rods. Men, women and children were beaten. Church property and vehicles were damaged.

"There was chaos and Christians started to flee for their lives in whichever direction they could," the witness said.

Police were summoned, but they did not intervene and "played the role of mere spectators," the witness told World Watch Monitor.

Attacks continued until 6 p.m., the witness said. Some Christians, from Maharashtra and Orissa, suffered injuries behind the ear and to the eye from being struck with iron rods. They were admitted to a nearby hospital for treatment, though later they left the hospital without informing the authorities.

Christian leaders from Rajnandgaon told World Watch Monitor they approached the superintendent of police, who came to the scene of the attack and began an investigation. He was stymied, however, because Abraham, the pastor, had disappeared. Police are watching the church building and are searching for Abraham.

India is No. 31 on the 2013 World Watch List, a ranking of the 50 countries where being a Christian is most difficult. Though Christians live openly without challenge in many parts of huge and diverse India, nationalistic Hindutva movements in some regions have attacked Christian communities with regularity, according to Open Doors International, which publishes the list. Open Doors is a worldwide ministry to persecuted Christians.