

Attacks in Punjab, India, Similar to Orissa Mayhem, Report Says

✖ Attacks on Christians last month in India's Punjab state following protests against banners depicting Jesus drinking and smoking were eerily similar to the anti-Christian violence in Orissa state in 2007 and 2008, according to a fact-finding mission.

"I was struck by the similarities between the attacks in northern Punjab state and the violence in eastern Orissa state in 2007 and 2008," said John Dayal, a member of the All India Christian Council (AICC) fact-finding mission, which released the report yesterday.

Dayal pointed out that factors such as the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) being part of the ruling coalition, police inaction, coordination of attacks and support of the local merchant community for Hindu nationalist groups in the anti-Christian attacks in Punjab reminded him of mayhem in Orissa's Kandhamal district.

"I have been in Orissa almost a week a month since December 2007 and have become quite familiar with the range of right-wing groups' violence techniques," Dayal, a member of government's National Integration Council, told Compass. "The strategy of the assailants in Punjab was eerily reminiscent of what was practiced and perfected against churches in Orissa."

Violence erupted in Orissa state's Kandhamal district during Christmas week of 2007, killing at least four Christians and burning 730 houses and 95 churches. The attacks came in retaliation for an alleged attack on a Hindu extremist Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council or VHP) leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati.

More blood was shed there in August-September 2008, after the assassination of Saraswati by a Maoist group, as Christians were falsely blamed for it. The attacks killed more than 100 people and burned 4,640 houses, 252 churches and 13 educational institutions.

Following the Feb. 20 attacks, the AICC fact-finding team visited the affected region from Feb. 22 to Feb. 25. In its report, it gave an account of the attacks in Batala town near Amritsar city in Gurdaspur district in west Punjab, where most Christians are from Dalit (formerly "untouchable" according to Hinduism's caste hierarchy) backgrounds.

It reported that supporters of the Hindu extremist Sangh Parivar burned the 1865-built Church of the Epiphany belonging to the Church of North India (CNI) denomination on Feb. 20. They also tried to destroy a nearby Salvation Army church, built in 1958, and attacked its pastor, Gurnam Singh, leaving him seriously injured.

The Sangh Parivar is referred to the family of outfits under the umbrella of India's chief Hindu nationalist organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), seen also as the parent body of the BJP.

"Even as the larger group of attackers focused on burning the CNI church, a group of men armed with sticks and rods came to the house of the CNI deacon," the report notes. "The deacon, Victor Gill, and his wife Parveen, hid themselves under the bed. The assailants damaged the doors, tried to enter the room forcibly, and told the couple they would be burnt alive if they did not come out."

At the same time, the report notes, Hindu nationalists at a second CNI house overturned a scooter, took gas from it and doused teacher Christopher Morris and his daughter Daisy with the fuel while her mother, Usha, cringed in their home.

"They tried to set the two on fire, but the matchbox had also

been soaked in the petrol, and despite three attempts to strike a match, the matchsticks would not ignite, saving the family from being burnt alive," the report states.

Provoked and Attacked

Christians were attacked while they were trying to enforce an area-wide closure of markets to protest a picture of Jesus Christ holding a can of beer in one hand a lit cigarette in another. It appeared on roadside banners in preparation for a Hindu festival, Ram Navami (the birthday of Rama), which falls on March 24 this year.

"The banners were sponsored by a coalition of local political, media and business leaders, together with the trading community, which is almost entirely Hindu," said the report without identifying the sponsors.

"The Sangh Parivar reacted to the Christian protest by mobilizing shopkeepers and youth 'to teach a lesson to Christians,'" the report states. "Otherwise, local shopkeepers routinely enforce closures.

The Rev. Madhu Chandra, AICC's regional secretary, also a fact-finding team member, told Compass that the banners were apparently put up to provoke Christians and then launch attacks on them. The fact-finding team included attorney M. Adeeb of the Human Rights Law Network and Marang Hansda of the AICC.

The offensive picture of Jesus was taken from a cursive writing exercise book for Class I of a private school in Shillong, the capital of the northeastern state of Meghalaya, reported the Press Trust of India on Feb. 18. Published by Skyline Publication, the book used the picture to illustrate the alphabet "I" for the word "Idol."

When some parents of the students noticed the picture, they reported it to the school authorities, which reported it to

police. Christians, who constitute 80 percent of Meghalaya's population, protested. On Feb. 18, police registered a case against the Delhi-based publisher and confiscated the books.

In Batala town in Punjab more than 1,500 miles away, however, the same picture was appeared on banners, causing tensions.

The Tribune, a regional newspaper, reported on Feb. 20 that Christian youth tried to forcibly implement the market shut-down, or "closure," and looted shops. But Chandra of the AICC said the district officials the fact-finding team met were not sure if the allegation was true.

"The officials asked us if the newspaper reports were true," he said. "But we also read it in newspapers only."

Dayal said that Hindu nationalists used the market shut-down to attack Christians.

"Instead of sympathizing and cooperating with the protest – as merchants do when the Sangh Parivar or the ruling Shironami Akali Dal party calls for closures on routine intervals – they sought to teach the Christians a lesson," said Dayal.

He added that in Orissa state's Kandhamal district, Hindu nationalist groups likewise befriended merchants, mostly tribal or aboriginal people, and turned them against Dalit Christians.

Police Inaction

The fact-finding report deplored police inaction. When the mob tried to burn Morris and his daughter Daisy, said the report, "police were watching" but did nothing to help.

It quoted Pastor Gurnam Singh as saying, "We pleaded with the police to help, but they did not."

Police were outnumbered by rioters, as happened in Kandhamal in Orissa, remarked Dayal.

Despite intelligence reports of Christian anger and the Hindu nationalist groups' plans to counterattack, authorities said they "could not enforce a quick curfew until late on Feb. 20 because most of the police were sent to the Pakistani border nearby, where Home Minister P. Chidambaram inaugurated a defence outpost."

By the time the police returned and a curfew was imposed, "violence had already occurred," the report states.

"No police report has been filed on the attempted murders, even as the top police and administrative officers enforced a one sided 'peace accord' on the local Christian leadership," the report notes. "Christians were instructed not to press for charges immediately so that a number of Christian youth who were arrested – together with a few Hindu men – could be released. Police forcibly cleaned up the Church of the Epiphany. They removed burnt furniture and made the presbyter whitewash the walls to remove traces of fuel oil used in the blaze. This was done before a formal enquiry could be conducted by the government."

Referring to the police inaction, Dayal pointed out that "the BJP, as in Orissa during 2007 and 2008, is in power in Punjab as member of the coalition government with the regional Shironami Akali Dal party.

Punjab Chief Minister Sardar Prakash Singh Badal has asked his officials to unravel the "entire conspiracy," the report states.

There are around 300,000 Christians in Punjab, or roughly 1.2 percent of the total population.