

Christians Face 1,000 Attacks in 500 Days in India

✖ Minority Christians in southern Karnataka state are under an unprecedented wave of Christian persecution, having faced more than 1,000 attacks in 500 days, according to an independent investigation by a former judge of the Karnataka High Court.

The spate began on Sept. 14, 2008, when at least 12 churches were attacked in one day in Karnataka's Mangalore city, in Dakshina Kannada district, said Justice Michael Saldanha, former judge of the Karnataka High Court.

"On Jan. 26 – the day we celebrated India's Republic Day – Karnataka's 1,000th attack took place in Mysore city," Saldanha told Compass, saying the figure was based on reports from faith-based organizations.

Saldanha conducted the People's Tribunal Enquiry into the attacks on Christians in Karnataka on behalf of the People's Union for Civil Liberties' Dakshina Kannada district chapter, the Catholic Association of South Kanara (another name for Dakshina Kannada) and the Karnataka Chapter of Transparency International.

"Attacks are taking place every day," said Saldanha, chairperson of the Karnataka Chapter of Transparency International.

The latest attack took place on Wednesday (March 17), when a mob of around 150 people led by the Hindu extremist *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (World Hindu Council or VHP) and its youth wing, *Bajrang Dal*, stormed the funeral of a 50-year-old Christian identified only as Isaac, reported the Karnataka-based Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC).

As Pastor Sunder Raj of St. Thomas Church in Gijahalli, near Arsikere in Hassan district, was about to begin the funeral service, the mob pulled the coffin apart and desecrated the cross the relatives of the deceased were carrying. They threw the body into a tractor and dumped it outside, saying his burial would have contaminated Indian soil and his body should be buried in Rome or the United States, added the GCIC.

With police intervention, the funeral took place later the same day.

Blaming the state government for the attacks, Saldanha said the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had "outdone Orissa."

Karnataka Home Minister V.S. Acharya denied the results of the inquiry.

"The allegation of Karnataka having faced 1,000 attacks is absolutely false," Acharya told Compass. "There is liberty in the state. Sections of the media are trying to hype it, and such claims are politically motivated. Karnataka is the most peaceful state in India, and the people are law-abiding."

The wave of persecution in Karnataka began as fallout of the anti-Christian mayhem in eastern Orissa state, where Maoists killed a VHP leader on Aug. 23, 2008, with Hindu extremists wrongly accusing Christians. The attacks in Orissa's Kandhamal district, the epicenter of the bloodbath, killed more than 100 people and burned 4,640 houses, 252 churches and 13 educational institutions.

Violent attacks have stopped in Orissa, but Karnataka continues to burn.

In addition to the attacks, numerous Christians also have faced false charges of fraudulent or forced conversions throughout Karnataka.

"I have been to many police stations where complaints of [forced] conversions have been lodged against Christians, and when I asked the police why they were acting on frivolous complaints, most of them told me that they had orders from above," he said.

In his report, he notes that Christians "are dragged to the police station under false allegations, immediately locked up, beaten up and denied bail by the lower judiciary, which functions as the loyal partner of the police department and refuses bail on the grounds that "the police have objected."

The report says 468 Christian workers in rural areas had been targeted with such actions since September 2008.

"Numerous others have been threatened and beaten up," the report states. "The police are totally out of control, with the lower judiciary having abdicated its constitutional obligation of safeguarding the citizens' rights particularly from a tyrannical state machinery, while the state government proclaims that everything is peaceful."

Chief Minister Bookanakere Siddalingappa Yeddyurappa and Home Minister Acharya are from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (Hindu nationalist conglomerate or the RSS), believed to be the parent organization of the BJP, Saldanha pointed out.

He also said that although the attacks on Christians had turned public sentiment against the BJP in Karnataka, the party seemed to care little as both opposition parties, the Congress Party and the regional Janata Dal- Secular (JD-S) party, were "in shambles" in the state.

In May 2009 the BJP lost general (national) elections, and since then sections of the party are in desperation, he said, adding, "Perhaps this is one of the reasons why attacks continue to happen in Karnataka."

Saldanha said the state government was controlling media coverage of the attacks by “monetary appeasement.”

“The citizens are told that the situation is happy and under control, principally because the greater part of the media is being fed or appeased with massive publicity advertisements which have cost the state exchequer over 400 million rupees [\$8.8 million], most of the money clandestinely billed to the various Government Corporations and Public bodies,” Saldanha states in the introduction to his yet unpublished report.

The BJP came to sole power in Karnataka in May 2008. Prior to that, it ruled in alliance with the JD-S party for 20 months.

There are a little more than 1 million Christians in Karnataka, where the total population is over 52 million.