

Christians in Kashmir, India Increasingly Fearful, Report Says

A fact-finding mission to India's Kashmir Valley found that Muslim leaders' increasingly shrill opposition to conversions has instilled fear among the Christian minority, which has been threatened as Christmas nears.

Christians in Srinagar, the summer capital of India's northernmost state of Jammu and Kashmir, are "really scared," said Dr. John Dayal, a member of the National Integration Council and part of the fact-finding team: "Christian men, women and children are in a state of panic, fearful of their security, uncertain of the future, uncertain of their jobs."

The Rev. Chander Mani Khanna, pastor of All Saints Church in Srinagar, was arrested on Nov. 19 on charges of hurting religious sentiments of Muslims after several youths were baptized; he was released on bail on Dec. 1. But the pastor of the Church of North India denomination, who is due to retire early next year, may never be able to go back to his church due to security concerns, Dayal said.

"There may be no proper celebration of Christmas in the church if the bishop does not send a new priest immediately," he added. "The church [in Srinagar] needs to get its act together in how it faces such religio-political persecution."

At the same time, a Shariah (Islamic law) court has reportedly summoned the Rev. Jim Borst, a Dutch Catholic missionary, to appear on charges of proselytizing and "forced conversions." Borst runs two schools in Baramulla and Srinagar that are said to have aroused jealousy in area Muslims.

Sentiment against Christians was evident when a member of the

Kashmir Bar Association disrupted court proceedings as a lawyer was seeking bail for Pastor Khanna.

“Their behavior tested the patience of the judge, who remarked, ‘Do you want me to hang him?’” states the fact-finding report, entitled “Dealing with Islamic Groups in Kashmir on Christian Persecution.”

The investigative team was headed by Dr. H.T. Sangliana, vice-chair of the National Commission for Minorities, and included the Rev. Dr. Richard Howell, general secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India. The team noted hostilities toward Christian workers, churches and Christian educational institutions in Kashmir.

Jammu and Kashmir state is 67 percent Muslim, 29.6 percent Hindu and 0.2 percent Christian, but the Kashmir Valley region is 97 percent Muslim, according to *Operation World*. Christian organizations run schools where many state leaders have studied.

Veiled Threat

Muslim leaders in the Kashmir Valley began to rally against Christians after a video recording of Muslim youth being baptized at the All Saints Church was posted on YouTube in late October. Kashmir Grand Mufti Bashir-ud-din Ahmad told the fact-finding team he would prove that “we are men, not impotent persons.” The highest authority in Islamic law in Kashmir added that the sharia court he heads will soon come out with its “judgment.”

The sharia court has no legal authority for non-Muslims in India, but the mufti hinted that the “judgment” could include demands such as a halt to further baptisms and morning prayers in schools run by Christians. He accused Christian schools of encouraging drug abuse among children, though the only evidence he offered was the statement that “it is well known.”

Though generally polite, the mufti issued a warning, saying,

"We will do what we have to do, and others will have to do what they have to do." He also said he was keeping an eye on the schools, their principals and staff, and that they would hear from him soon.

The report said it was clear that the mufti was "contemplating a denunciation of the church, if not actually calling for mass action," though he had asserted there would be no violence.

Sharia courts deal only in local civil matters applicable only to Muslims. But the mufti summoned the pastor to appear for a hearing held on Nov. 17 concerning allegations of fraudulent conversion. Bishop Pradeep Kumar Samantaroy of the Church of North India has said the mufti's allegation that Pastor Khanna had converted Muslims by offering money is "totally baseless and untrue."

The pastor earlier told Compass that the Muslim youths had been coming to the church on their own initiative and wanted to take part in Holy Communion. Pastor Khanna told them they had to follow a procedure if they wanted to join in the sacrament, and they expressed desire to be baptized in due course.

The fact-finding team, which visited Kashmir from Nov. 29 to Dec. 2, criticized the role of local media in helping vested interests to create tensions.

"The reporting and editorializing have been one-sided and without any reference to the truth as seen by the religious minority," the report states.

The team also concluded that the state administration was making concessions to the Muslim majority for political reasons, and that police had "acted on behalf of the political leadership."

Article 370 of the Indian Constitution grants considerable autonomy to states, where many Indian institutions and laws

have no jurisdiction.

With India and Pakistan frequently fighting over Kashmir, local complexities have given rise to extremism and a rigid politico-religious Islamic clergy that seeks to carve out space to challenge the state government, political groups and the Indian army, according to the report.

“The vast majority of Kashmiris are peaceful and adhere to a soft and melodious Sufi Islam, far removed from the stridency of Wahhabism espoused by the extremist groups,” the report notes.

Local residents told the team that some extremist groups and other vested interests have been seeking to use the issue of conversion in their confrontation with the state government, political parties and moderate Islamic groups. They were “looking to score political points against each other, and any excuse was good enough to foment trouble,” according to the report.

This dynamic was why the state government was quick to arrest Pastor Khanna, and it will go to any extreme to ward off trouble from Islamic groups, the report said.

As Christmas approaches, the government has moved to its winter capital in Jammu, and there is no senior officer in Srinagar to give any assurance of security to the Christian community, the team pointed out. There is also a “total absence” of human rights organizations in the region, the team reported.

Barring a few sporadic incidents of communal violence, Christians and Muslims had had good relations in Kashmir, as elsewhere in India. Tensions in Kashmir began in March 2003, however, after local newspapers alleged that Christian missionaries were converting Muslim youth; the allegations were based on an article on a U.S. evangelical news website that local Christians say was fictitious.

The fact-finding team said Kashmir's Muslim groups were not concerned that, in the rest of India, Christians and Muslims are both minorities that need each other and civil society at large in order to face the challenge of Hindu nationalists, who see the two communities as "outsiders."

The report called for the formation of a state minorities commission and assurances of security for Christians from state and federal governments.

There is also a need for introspection within the church, the team reported, regarding the spoken word, the language of evangelization and the translations of various Biblical verses.

"We have seen many verses whose local translation entirely mutilates the real meaning and lends itself to misinterpretation," the report states. This exercise must be carried out "as early as possible, not just for the sake of the Kashmir Valley, but for the country as a whole."