

Indian Christians Sentenced to Life Terms Will Appeal

India's churches are urging an appeal of the lifetime sentences handed down Oct. 3 to seven men convicted for the 2008 murder of a prominent Hindu leader.

"The seven Christians are innocent," said the Rev. Charles Irudayam, executive secretary of the Office for Justice, Peace and Development within the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India. "The ruling is manifestly wrong and unjust. We call for the release of the seven innocent, sentenced without evidence," he said via a statement issued to the Catholic news service Agenzia Fides.

An eighth defendant, Pulari Rama Rao, a leader in India's communist Naxalite movement, also was sentenced to life in prison.

The eight were among 14 the government suspected of carrying out the August 2008 murder of Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati and four others at a school in the rural heart of Orissa state. Saraswati was a Hindu monk and an activist for the welfare of India's many indigenous, and impoverished, tribes. A mob of about 50 people surrounded the school, and several opened fire.

One of the 14 suspects, not among the eight sentenced Oct. 3, is in custody, and the remaining five remain at large, according to the Times of India.

The 2008 killings touched off a wave of violence, much of it directed at Christians, whom many angered Hindus considered responsible. Orissa is among the states along India's eastern flank, the heartland of the communist Naxalite movement, which has attracted many Christians in India's lower castes. Police focused their investigation on Maoists, even as leaders in the

movement said Christians were among those pressing for Saraswati's death. Saraswati was prominent in the Viśva Hindu Pariṣad, or VHP, a Hindu nationalist political party, and took a hard line against Christians attempting to convert Hindus.

The violence following Saraswati's murder left nearly 40 people dead, some of them dragged from their homes and burned. Thousands of Christians fled their villages. Christian homes, churches and an orphanage were burned.

The eight defendants, tried in a district court in the rural town of Phulbani, were convicted Sept. 30 of murder, criminal conspiracy, unlawful assembly and rioting. Two also were found guilty of violating weapons laws.

Aside from Rao, the seven others who were convicted are Christian and killed Saraswati because he was converting Christians to Hinduism, prosecution lawyer Bhagaban Mohanty told the Indo-Asian News Service after the verdict.

"The judge convicted them purely on the basis of circumstantial evidence and the deposition of witnesses," the news service quoted Mohanty as saying.

Prosecutors sought the death penalty. Instead, the additional district and sessions judge of Kandhamal, Rajendra Kumar Tosh, ruling from a court in the Orissa capital of Bhubaneswar, handed down life sentences.

A lawyer for the seven told the Times of India "we will certainly appeal" the convictions and sentences to the Orissa high court.

"There was no evidence against my clients and I would advise them to move Orissa high court," the Times quoted attorney Bijay Mishra as saying.

Christian advocates said the convictions are consistent with a larger pattern of pressure upon Christians.

“It is really a heartbreaking story for modern India,” Sajan George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians, told Fides. “Seven people have already lost five precious years of their lives in prison without a fair trial. And thousands of other Christians who survived the most brutal wave of attacks, are still living in fear. Prosecutors and judges have intentionally delayed the trial.” He said “the judiciary is influenced by Hindu nationalist groups and extremists.”

Six days after the sentences were handed down, the same Phulbani court, citing a lack of evidence, acquitted five defendants accused of burning down a house during the 2008 violence that followed Saraswati’s murder. George told the Catholic news site that the decision, coming so soon after the conviction of the seven Christian men, serves to illustrate what he said is a tilt of justice against India’s Christian minority.