

Karnataka Most Dangerous State in India for Christians

Attacks on Christians accelerated over the Christmas and New Year's holidays in the south Indian state of Karnataka, which was identified as the most unsafe place for the religious minority for the third consecutive year in 2011.

With 49 cases of violence and hostility against Christians in 2011, Karnataka remained the state with the highest incidence of persecution, according to the Evangelical Fellowship of India's annual report, "Battered and Bruised ..."

The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC), which is based in Karnataka's capital of Bengaluru and initially reported most of the incidents, also documented at least six anti-Christian attacks between Christmas Eve 2011 and New Year's Day.

On the evening of Jan. 1, about 20 men disrupted the New Year's Day worship service of the Blessing Youth Mission Church at the house of a believer in Hunnur village, in Jamkhandi division of Bagalkot district. Suspected Hindu extremists from the Bajrang Dal, the men manhandled pastor Siddu Seemanth Gunike, accusing him of forcibly and fraudulently converting Hindus. Local police intervened and rescued the pastor and other Christians.

On New Year's Eve, more than 10 men trespassed onto the premises of the Karnataka Calvary Fellowship Church, in the Ganeshgudi area in Joida division of North Canara district, and disrupted a service of thanksgiving. Believed to be Hindu nationalists, the men forced the church to stop the service. Police arrived but only to summon the pastor, identified as P.R. Jose, to the police station the following morning. After GCIC's intervention, however, a senior police official assured

the Christians of security.

On the evening of Dec. 28, 2011, a group of men from the nationalist Hindu Sriram Sene disrupted the prayer meeting of the Divyadarsana Ministry Church at the home of a Christian, Bima Naik, in SS Layout in Davanagere city, the headquarters of the central Davanagere district. Alleging the meeting was to convert Hindus, the men tried to manhandle the Christians. Police arrived, but instead of detaining the intruders took pastor Raju Doddamani, Naik and three other Christians to the police station for interrogation. They were released late at night.

The same day, unidentified persons burned a Christmas tree and a crib that were part of Christmas celebrations by local Catholics in Maripalla area in Bantwal division of the Dakshina Kannada district. Police arrested two men, but their identities were not disclosed.

Police reportedly said the decorations were burned over suspicion of "conversions." Evangelizing and conversion are legal in India.

Also on Dec. 28, suspected Hindu nationalists ransacked and broke windows of the Hebron Assembly Church in the Haleangadi area of Mangalore division in Dakshina Kannada district. The attackers also destroyed household items in the house of the pastor, identified only as Prasanna. Police registered a case against the attackers, but at press time no one was reported to have been arrested.

On the evening of Dec. 25, about 20 people beat Christians with stones and wooden clubs as they celebrated Christmas at a house in the Maindguri area, near Surathkal, a few miles from the city of Mangalore, in Dakshina Kannada district. The attackers, allegedly from a local extremist *Hindu Jagran Vedike* (Hindu Revival Forum), attacked the Christians, including women and children, indiscriminately.

A 27-year-old man identified only as Joyson fractured his leg; a pastor's wife identified as Lata, sustained chest injuries; a 29-year-old woman identified as Roshini and another woman identified as Annamma received head injuries; and a 23-year-old man identified only as Deepak broke his nasal bridge in the attack. A local Christian told Compass by phone that police arrested five of the attackers, but that they had been released on bail.

The attacks on Christians in Karnataka are "shameful" and "a blot on the secular and democratic India," GCIC President Sajan K. George said. The local government and authorities were "complicit in the persecution against Christians," he added.

Anti-Christian attacks increased in the state after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to sole power in May 2008. At least 28 attacks were reported in less than two months in August and September of that year. In 2009, Karnataka witnessed at least 48 attacks, and the number grew to 56 in 2010, according to the EFI.

In its 2010 report of Christian persecution in India, the EFI had warned about increasing attacks on Christians in Karnataka, remarking that "although in 2007 and 2008 two major incidents of violence occurred in eastern Orissa state's Kandhamal district and hit headlines in the national as well as international media, little efforts have been taken by authorities in India to tackle the root causes of communal tensions, namely divisive propaganda and activities by powerful right-wing Hindu groups, who do not represent the tolerant Hindu community."

The violence in Kandhamal district during Christmas week of 2007 killed at least four Christians and burned 730 houses and 95 churches, according to the All India Christian Council (AICC). These attacks were preceded by around 200 incidents of anti-Christian attacks in other parts of the country.

Violence re-erupted in Kandhamal district in August 2008, killing more than 100 people and resulting in the incineration of 4,640 houses, 252 churches and 13 educational institutions, according to the AICC.

Christians account for about 2.3 percent of India's population, which is more than 1 billion.