

Officials in India on Defensive at “Watch List” Designation

✖ Ahead of one-year remembrances of massive anti-Christian violence in the eastern state of Orissa, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has put India on its “Watch List” for the country’s violations of religious freedom, evoking strong reactions from the Indian government.

USCIRF Chairman Leonard Leo said in a statement on Aug. 12 that it was “extremely disappointing” that India “has done so little to protect and bring justice to its religious minorities under siege.”

The U.S. panel’s decision was “regrettable,” a spokesperson for India’s Ministry of External Affairs, Vishnu Prakash, said in a statement on Thursday, after the USCIRF put India on the list due to a “disturbing increase” in violence on minorities and a growing culture of impunity in the country.

Violence erupted in Kandhamal district of the eastern state of Orissa in August-September 2008, killing more than 100 people and burning 4,640 houses, 252 churches and 13 educational institutions, according to rights groups such as the All India Christian Council (AICC), the Global Council of India Christians (GCIC) and the Christian Legal Association (CLA).

“India’s democratic institutions charged with upholding the rule of law, most notably state and central judiciaries and police, have emerged as unwilling or unable to seek redress for victims of the violence,” Leo said. “More must be done to ensure future violence does not occur and that perpetrators are held accountable.”

Disagreeing with the USCIRF report, the foreign ministry's Prakash said India is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. "The Constitution of India guarantees freedom of religion and equality of opportunity to all its citizens, who live and work together in peace and harmony," he said.

Christians were shocked by the foreign ministry spokesman's claim that "aberrations, if any, are dealt with promptly within our legal framework, under the watchful eye of an independent judiciary and a vigilant media."

Attorney Robin Ratnakar David, president of the CLA, told Compass that one year after the violence only six people have been convicted in just two cases of rioting, while several suspects have been acquitted in four such cases despite the formation of fast-track courts.

Dr. John Dayal, secretary general of the AICC, pointed out that the more than 50,000 people who fled to forests or took shelter in refugee camps have not returned home out of fear of Hindu nationalist extremists who demand they either convert to Hinduism or leave their villages.

He said there also had been several "pogroms against Muslims, often sponsored or condoned by the state."

In 2002, India's worst-ever anti-Muslim violence occurred in the western state of Gujarat. A compartment of a train, the Sabarmati Express, caught fire—or was set on fire (as claimed by Hindu extremists)—near the Godhra city railway station on Feb. 27. In the fire, 58 Hindu passengers, mainly supporters of the Hindu extremist Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council or VHP), were killed. The VHP and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) claimed it was an attack by Islamic terrorists; the ensuing violence killed more than 2,000 people, mostly Muslims.

Following the anti-Muslim violence, the USCIRF recommended that India be designated a "Country of Particular Concern"

(CPC), its list of the world's worst violators of religious freedom. India was removed from the CPC list in 2005.

Designation on the Watch List means a country requires "close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the government," according to USCIRF. The other countries on USCIRF's Watch List are Afghanistan, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, Laos, the Russian Federation, Somalia, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Venezuela.

CLA attorney David said the August-September 2008 violence in Kandhamal could have been prevented had the administration brought to justice those responsible for previous mayhem in December 2007. The December 2007 violence in Kandhamal killed at least four Christians, burned as many as 730 houses and 95 churches and rendered thousands homeless.

The attacks were launched under the pretext of avenging an alleged attack on a VHP leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati. It was the assassination of Saraswati by Maoists (extreme Marxists) on Aug. 23, 2008 that sparked the second spate of violence in Kandhamal, as Hindu nationalists blamed non-Marxist, local Christians for it.

Dayal said the USCIRF's latest conclusions could have been avoided if more action had been taken against the perpetrators of last year's violence.

"The USCIRF action would not have been possible, and India would have been able to rebuff the U.S. scrutiny more effectively, if several thousand Christians were still not in refugee camps, if the killers were still not roaming scot-free and if witnesses, including widows, were not being coerced," he said.

'Indifferent'

Shashi Tharoor, India's Minister of State for External

Affairs, told a private news channel that India did not need approbation from outside its borders.

“As far as we are concerned, we are essentially indifferent to how others view the situation,” he said. “In democracy, what matters to us is how we deal with our own internal issues. I don’t think we need any certificates from outside.”

He dismissed the report as meddling in internal affairs even though between June 2002 and February 2007 Tharoor served as under-secretary general for communications and public information for the United Nations, a body representative of international accountability in human rights.

In its annual report, India’s home (interior) ministry had acknowledged that the incidence of communal violence was high. It noted that in 2008, as many as 943 communal incidents (mainly against Muslims and Christians) took place in which 167 persons were killed and 2,354 persons were injured. The figures were up from those of 2007, when there were 761 incidents in which 99 persons were killed and 2,227 persons were injured.

Justifying its decision, the USCIRF report stated that several incidents of communal violence have occurred in various parts of the country resulting in many deaths and mass displacements, particularly of members of the Christian and Muslim minorities, “including major incidents against Christian communities within the 2008-2009 reporting period.”

“Because the government’s response at the state and local levels has been found to be largely inadequate and the national government has failed to take effective measures to ensure the rights of religious minorities in several states, the Commission decided to place India on its Watch List.”

The USCIRF had released its 2009 annual report on religious freedom across the globe on May 1 but put the India report on hold, planning to prepare it after a visit to the country in

June. A USCIRF team planned to visit India to speak to the government and others concerning the situation in Kandhamal and Gujarat on June 12, but the Indian embassy in Washington, D.C. did not provide visas in time.

"USCIRF's India chapter was released this week to mark the one-year anniversary of the start of the anti-Christian violence in Orissa," Leo pointed out in last week's statement.

'Teflon-Coated State'

The AICC's Dayal seemed pessimistic about a change in the government's attitude.

"Unfortunately, nothing really impacts the government of India or the government of Indian states," he said. "The state, and our social conscience, seems Teflon-coated. The patriotic media and political sector dismiss international scrutiny as interference in the internal affairs of India, and a beaten-into-submission section of the leadership of religious minorities assumes silence to be the best form of security and safety."

Dr. Sajan George, the national convenor of the GCIC, said the report showed that India had become a "super violator" of human rights. The Rev. Dr. Babu Joseph, spokesman for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, said the U.S. panel's report did not augur well with India's claim to find a respectable place within the community of nations.

"India as an emerging economic power in the world should also endeavor to better its records of protecting human rights, particularly when it comes to religious freedom of its citizens," Joseph said.

Joseph told Compass the USCIRF report was "a clear indication of the growing concern of the international community with India's repeated failure to take decisive and corrective measures to contain religious intolerance."

Christian leaders generally lauded the report, with Dayal saying, "India's record on the persecution of minorities and the violation of religious freedom has been a matter of international shame for the nation."