

Pastor in India Traumatized after Attack

A pastor in India's Rajasthan state who was stripped, beaten and wounded by Hindu extremists earlier this month is still traumatized, while police have yet to investigate due to family fears of further violence, security and hospital officials said.

Pastor Hari Shankar Ninama, 65, was praying in a home in Ambarunda, Peepal Khoont, Pratapgarh district for an 8-year-old boy's recovery from illness on Feb. 1 when at least 10 Hindu extremists arrived on motorbikes and stormed in, he said. The assailants beat him and, putting him on one of their motorbikes, took him outside the village, where they stripped off his clothes and struck him.

They fled after stealing his watch, cell phone and a small amount of money.

Pastor Ninama told Compass that he was visiting his daughter Galadh Mangiya Bujh in Ambarunda village when her neighbor, Lasiya Bujh, requested he pray for his sick child. Ambarunda is 17 kilometers (nearly 11 miles) from Pastor Ninama's home village of Aamliya.

"As I sat praying, a group of at least 10 men interrupted the prayer and started to beat me," Pastor Ninama said.

Others were awaiting prayer at the home of the pastor's daughter and witnessed the attack, including Paasu Dindore.

"They slapped Pastor Ninama's daughter Galadh and beat the sick boy's father too," Dindore said. "I was there to request Pastor Ninama to pray for me, and as soon as the attack took place I fled from the spot and witnessed the event from a distance, hiding."

Pastor Ninama identified two of the attackers as Dhuliya and Gautam; the others are still unidentified.

"They criticized me with abusive language and accusations of forced conversion and made me repeat words after them," Pastor Ninama said, still visibly in pain and sobbing.

The pastor said they stripped him after taking him to the main road outside the village.

"They hit me again and again mercilessly with wooden clubs and their hands, fists and legs," he said. "They stole my mobile phone, diary, some documents, wristwatch and 500 rupees (US\$11). Threatening me to kill me if I continue to spread Christianity, they left me naked on the road and fled."

Threats

Area Sub-Inspector Bhagwat Singh said the pastor's family was afraid that a police investigation would lead to retaliation from the extremists.

"Ninama's daughter and son-in-law came to the police station requesting the police not to pursue the case," he said, adding that police had not investigated.

Area source Sunny Meda told Compass that the extremists have threatened to burn down the home of Pastor Ninama's daughter if police prosecute.

"For three days Galadh and her family were not allowed to leave the village or even go to the marketplace," Meda said. "There is fear and terror among the Christian families in the village."

Police have yet to make any arrests.

Dindore, a member of Pastor Ninama's house church, said there have been no church services since he was attacked.

Though feeble, however, Pastor Ninama told Compass that he

will continue to evangelize in area villages and pray for people wherever and whenever called.

Sub-Inspector Singh confirmed that Pastor Ninama walked naked five miles from the site of the beating to the police station.

"I put some clothes on him when he reached the police station," Singh said.

Pastor Ninama filed a First Information Report, and police have registered a case for voluntarily causing hurt, wrongful restraint, theft, defamation and intentional insult with intent to provoke breach of the peace, unlawful assembly and disturbing a religious assembly.

Injuries

The pastor received treatment at Mahatma Gandhi Medical Center for two days before being transferred to a private hospital.

Dr. Ravi Upadhaya told Compass that Ninama's injuries were emotional as well as physical.

"He had soft tissue injuries in many parts of his body, including bruise marks all over his back and thigh, ranging from five centimeters to eight centimeters long and two to five centimeters wide," Dr. Upadhaya said. "He also had a sharp wound behind his neck which bled, and the victim complained of internal chest pain. But more than physical pain, the 65-year-old man is mentally traumatized."

He was discharged from the private hospital on Feb. 11 and still complains of having body pain.

A farmer, Pastor Ninama converted from Hinduism to Christianity 12 years ago. He and his wife have six daughters and two sons. He leads a house church in his home for about 40 people from his own and nearby villages, including the village where the attack took place.

The Congress Party is in power in Rajasthan, with Ashok Gehlot as chief minister since December 2008. Previously the Bharatiya Janata Party ruled, passing a controversial “anti-conversion law,” which outlaws forced or fraudulent conversion but is frequently misused to harass Christians with false accusations.

The bill makes conversion a non-bailable offense subject to immediate arrest and up to five years in jail. The bill faced stiff opposition from then-Gov. Pratibha Devisingh Patil.