

Radicals Arrested After Church Bombings Rock Assembly

Three people have been arrested in connection with the recent bombing of two churches in Nepal's easternmost Jhapa district.

The bombings took place on September 14, hours after Nepal's Constituent Assembly had rejected calls to revert the country to a Hindu state. Both churches suffered structural damage, but nobody was hurt.

Bombs were also planted at two other churches, but police successfully defused one, while another exploded, injuring two policemen, after it had been removed from the church.

Pamphlets promoting the radical Hindu organisation, Hindu Morcha Nepal, were reportedly found at each of the churches.

Those arrested were Ram Bhandari, 51, Krishna Chudal, 56, and Ramchandra Baniya, 45. Police said they were still hunting four further suspects, including the suspected ringleader, Madhav Bhandari, who is believed to have been behind the creation of the Hindu Morcha Nepal group, which was formed by merging six nationalist groups, including Nepal Shiv Sena.

Hindu Morcha Nepal has published a press statement, calling for Christian leaders to leave Nepal and for converts to Christianity to return to Hinduism. The group says the "Christianization" of Nepal is the main cause of disruption to Nepal's religious unity and that it wants Nepal to return to its former status as a Hindu Kingdom.

"From today, the Morcha declares Nepal a Christian-free Hindu nation. We warn all the Christian religious leaders to leave Nepal, and appeal to all those who converted to Christianity to return home [convert back to Hinduism]," says the

statement.

The group also demands serious discussions about amending the constitution, threatening strikes if no action is taken by authorities.

Hindu Morcha Nepal says the authorities did not take into account the will of the Nepali people, and instead only considered the opinion of 2 percent of the population, which roughly equates to the Christian population of Nepal.

Nepal became a secular state in 2007, after the abolition of the monarchy a year before, but the country has witnessed a rise in Hindu nationalism, led by the Rastirya Prajatantra Party Nepal (RPP-N).

Christians feared that removing the term secularism from the constitution would embolden nationalists, as World Watch Monitor reported in August.

Although Nepal stayed secular, Christians remain fearful following the adoption on September 20 of a constitution which included controversial amendments to Article 31(3), which now states: "Any act to convert another person from one religion to another, or any act or behaviour to undermine or jeopardise the religion of another [will be] punishable by law".

Attempting to convert someone to another religion was already prohibited in Nepal, but the amendments mean that anything perceived as "evangelistic" is now punishable by law. Christians fear this could eventually render all Christian activity illegal.

Background

One of the groups subsumed by Hindu Morcha Nepal was the Nepal Defence Army (NDA), the former head of which, Ram Prasad Mainali, was recently released from prison.

World Watch Monitor interviewed him in 2009, while he was

serving a prison sentence for the bombing of a Catholic church in Kathmandu.

Two people were killed and a dozen others injured in the 2009 blast at the parish of Our Lady of the Assumption. Mainali told World Watch Monitor he regretted his actions and had repented of his crime, since becoming interested in Christianity.

However, Nepali investigators later claimed he had only pretended to repent in order to disguise the terrorist activities he was still engaged in from prison. In March 2011, six suspected colleagues of Mainali were arrested while in possession of powerful "socket bombs".

Mainali had earlier told World Watch Monitor that he formed the NDA in 2007 with the support of Hindu nationalists in India to re-establish the Hindu monarchy.

The NDA was believed to be responsible for several bombings of mosques and churches, killing Muslims and Christians, including the Rev. John Prakash Moyalan, a Catholic priest, in 2008.