

Spate of Attacks on Christians Erupts in Orissa, India

Hindu extremists have attacked Koya tribal Christians in villages in a remote area of Orissa state at least 15 times since Dec. 8, 2010, Christian leaders said.

In the latest incident in Murliguda, about 80 kilometers (50 miles) from Malkangiri town, about 60 assailants from the Hindu extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh on Feb. 23 damaged the eardrums of Bhadan Hontal and beat another Christian, Markari Soma, until he fell unconscious, according to a report by the Malkangiri District Christian Manch (MDCM, with Manch meaning "Forum").

Christian women, some pregnant, as well as children were among those injured in the attacks on churches, reported Pastor Vijay Purusu of Bethel Church and president of the MDCM. The spate of attacks began on Dec. 8 in Katanpali village, when about 35 Hindu extremists stormed the house of Pastor Mark Markani and beat him.

"Police action was delayed, so it resulted in more attacks against the Christians," Pastor Purusu told Compass.

On Dec. 25, some 200 extremists barged into a Christmas Day celebration at a church in Koyi Konda village, beat the worshippers and destroyed furniture. Some church members received serious injuries on their hands, head and chest. About 10 houses belonging to Christians and their crops were destroyed, according to the MDCM.

The Christians filed a police complaint, but no action was taken, the forum reported.

"Persecution against the Christians has become a daily occurrence in the area," Pastor Purusu said.

Christians have suffered midnight raids on prayer meetings in which they have been beaten, he said, resulting in some Christians fleeing their homes and going into hiding. At least four families have left their village and not returned due to extremist warnings, reported the MDCM.

"There is great fear among the people because of the threats they received from the extremists," Pastor Purusu said.

At the same time, Hindu extremists have forced about 25 people to convert into Hinduism in the Mottu area, the forum reported.

Church leaders said increased attacks on Christians are a symptom of fear and envy among Hindu extremists, who perceive that Christianity is spreading in many areas and who mistake Christian social and educational ministries as illegally "luring" people to convert.

The MDCM last month met with the district collector and superintendent of police, and Christian leaders had submitted a memorandum to the state chief minister on Jan. 27.

"Delayed action of the police, and less police force on duty aggravated the matter," the Rev. Rendang Remo Paul stated in the MDCM report. He led a team consisting of representatives of the National Council of Churches in India, Church of South India and the Indian Missionaries Society that met with district collector on Feb. 3.

"We told the district collector that the situation must not become another Kandhamal [where large-scale violence broke out in Orissa in 2008], and the district administrator is responsible to curb the situation," Pastor Paul stated. "To our plea he said, 'Let's see, because it has just started.'"

The local Christian community has met with various district authorities to address the situation, including the chief minister, said Tehmina Arora of the Christian Legal Association.

“However, the situation in Malkangiri is very tense, and the police do not have control over large portions of the district due to Naxalites [Communist militants],” she said. “This is the biggest hurdle in controlling the situation.”

Yesterday (March 3) area Christian leaders again met with the area district collector, who assured them that immediate action would be taken. Meantime, village Christians received rice and some essential items from the administration.

Area Christians fear that Malkangiri may see the same kind of eruption of violence that killed at least 100 people in Kandhamal district, as the same officials—R. Vineel Krishna, district collector; Anurudh Kumar Singh, superintendent of police; a second officer of Mottu police station identified only as Jaal; and a project director, Gobinda Dansena—have been transferred from Kandhamal to Malkangiri district, Pastor Paul reported.