

## Sporadic Violence against Christians Continues in Orissa

Contributed by AICC  
 Thursday, 03 January 2008  
 Last Updated Friday, 04 January 2008

For more information, contact: Dr. Joseph D'souza, aicc President; Sam Paul, aicc Secretary of Public Affairs. For immediate release: Minister of Home Affairs sees damage to Christian villages; aicc ready to begin relief operations. HYDERABAD &ndash; Jan. 3, 2008 &ndash; Despite the deployment of federal troops, curfews, and intensifying media attention, sporadic violence continued in rural Orissa. Attacks on Christians began on Christmas Eve, eleven days ago. The confirmed death toll by the All India Christian Council (aicc) increased to nine Christians and is expected to rise further. Media reports say that Shivraj Patil, Minister of Home Affairs, toured the hardest hit areas yesterday and expressed his condolences to the Christian community.

"We are deeply saddened to report the confirmed death toll climbed today to nine. We expect it to increase further. Our worst fears are coming true. While the government played the blame-game and Hindutva activists stopped police by blocking roads with trees, isolated tribal and Dalit Christians died. Several leave behind wives and children," said Dr. Joseph D'souza, aicc President. "This tragedy could become worse. The outside world is still barred from entering the affected areas and we are specifically worried about those living in relief camps or hiding in the forests. Temperatures are dropping and many have been without food for days," said D'souza. The Orissa government has said only two people died. Sixty-five churches were vandalised and destroyed, and more reports are coming in. At least 600 Christian homes were burned. The aicc is ready to engage in relief work as soon as curfews are lifted and the affected villages are accessible. Relief plans call for rebuilding churches, Christian homes, and distribution of blankets and food for people who have been hiding in forests for days. The aicc's previous experience includes coordinated global relief efforts after the Gujarat Earthquake in 2001 and the Asian Tsunami in 2005. In a disturbing development, many media reports in India said hardline Hindu nationalist leaders from the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) criticised the Minister of Home Affairs for only visiting a village where several hundred Christian homes were burned down. They say this shows bias since Hindus were also allegedly victimised. "Today I personally wrote to the Union Home Minister and asked him to release the findings from his visit. Amidst baseless allegations that Christians started the violence, we must know the truth sooner rather than later. Let me be clear. We condemn anyone who instigates violence. If Christians burned Hindu homes or shops, they must face the legal consequences. But it's clear that Hindutva activists initiated hundred of attacks and the Christian community suffered most," said Sam Paul, aicc Secretary of Public Affairs. Independent fact finding teams continue to be blocked from entering affected areas. Police allegedly cannot access troubled rural areas due to roadblocks. There are curfews in many places. The federal government has only dispatched a handful of troops, reportedly because the Orissa government is not requesting assistance. Aicc leaders in New Delhi were told the National Commission for Minorities scheduled a team to arrive on Jan. 8, 2008, and the National Human Rights Commission is deputing a team as soon as possible. The aicc and the All India Confederation of SC/ST Organisations, led by Dr. Udit Raj, will organise a protest rally in Bubhaneshwar, Orissa, on January 10, 2008. Details are to be announced soon. The violence allegedly began when Christians in Bamunigaon village in Kandhamal district of Orissa began to celebrate Christmas Eve. Local Hindu fundamentalists opposed the event and a fight ensued. Also, a Hindutva leader, Swami Saraswati, was attacked by unknown assailants -- he alleged they were Christians -- near Daringbadi while he was traveling. The next day the VHP called for a strike and its members began attacking Christians across the state. The All India Christian Council (www.aiccindia.org), birthed in 1998, exists to protect and serve the Christian community, minorities, and the oppressed castes. The aicc is a coalition of thousands of Indian denominations, organizations, and lay leaders.

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