

Fear and uncertainty grip people of Kandhamal

Contributed by Correspondent

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Thousands of Christians are still hiding in forests; Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik visits Tikabali

Kandhamal: A week after communal violence erupted in Kandhamal district and other parts of Orissa after the killing of Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader Swami Lakshmanananda, thousands of Christian men and women are still hiding in forest hills and relief camps are overflowing with riot-hit people.

Although the police and Rapid Action Force personnel are staging flag marches on the national highways and other major roads of Kandhamal, they have not been able to reach the hundreds of villages where houses of Christian families had been burnt down by those protesting the killing of the Swami.

Contrary to the State Government's claim, many interior roads in Kandhamal remained blocked even on 31 August 2008 and reporters attempting to reach the riot-affected hamlets had to return half-way.

The road beyond Braka village, just about six km from Tikabali, was blocked with a felled tree. No one from the administration seemed to have reached the place so far. The affected hamlets that were approachable from different block headquarters towns wore a deserted look. Only cows that the riot-hit families had in their homes could be seen moving around.

Fear and uncertainty have gripped the minds of thousands of people who have taken shelter at the relief camps after being attacked allegedly by supporters of VHP, its allied organisations and the ruling BJD-BJP combine. Reports of recovery of burnt bodies have come in from remote pockets of Raikia and G Udaygiri.

With tears rolling down her cheeks, a frail Sushma Digal from Luringia village under Raikia Block expressed her helplessness — she was not aware of the whereabouts of several members of her family.

Sushma Digal reached one of the relief camps in G Udaygiri on 29 August 2008 after hiding in a forest with other villagers. They fled their village when rioters attacked it two days after the VHP leader's killing. Jacob Digal (50), one of her elder brothers, was lynched by a mob from the adjacent village.

At the relief camps set up at high school buildings at Tikabali and G Udaygiri, hundreds of men, women and children could be seen jostling for space. Their numbers are swelling with those hiding in the forests reaching these camps. With their houses burnt and valuables looted, they have no other place to go.

Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik reached the district on 30 August 2008 and visited the camp at Tikabali. He would review the law and order situation at Phulbani town on 31 August 2008 and visit a few more relief camps.

Prayer houses attacked

The situation arising out of communal violence, triggered by a graffiti on a college notice board in Jeypore town of Koraput, has turned volatile. The police burst teargas shells and resorted to lathi-charge and blank firing to disperse the mob. One student was injured. Koraput Superintendent of Police Dipak Kumar and Sub-Collector Sarat Nayak were among the scores of people and policemen injured.

Several Christian institutions, including a church, were attacked. Three prayer houses in Baipariguda block of the district were reportedly vandalised by the mob following the incidents in Jeypore.

(Source: The Hindu, 31 August 2008)