

Hope fades after one month of widespread attacks on Christians in India

Contributed by AICC
Thursday, 25 September 2008

For more information, contact:

Dr. Sam Paul, aicc National Secretary Public Affairs

For immediate release: inadequate government action and continuing attacks by Hindutva fundamentalists point to more violence in future; aicc recommends specific corrective actions

HYDERABAD – September 25, 2008 – Over one hundred churches were burned, dozens of Christians killed, and thousands attacked in their homes across India in the last month. Since the Central and state governments have responded slowly, the All India Christian Council (aicc) expects more violence in the days leading up to national elections, which are required by May 2009. The aicc is working on advocacy efforts from Geneva to Washington, D.C. to New Delhi and is releasing a list of recommended action points. The violence started during a strike in Orissa state on Aug. 25, 2008, called by hardliner Hindu fundamentalist groups to protest the murder of a swami by unknown assailants.

Dr. Joseph D'souza, aicc president, said, "It's been a month since unprecedented, premeditated attacks on Christians started in Orissa state. India has witnessed innocent Christians beaten, killed, and their property destroyed throughout our nation. The response of some government officials and leaders of Hindu fundamentalist groups was predictable. They talk of 'conversion' as if this were an evil, unnatural thing. They make accusations about 'foreign funding' of churches to create fear. What we haven't seen is firm progress toward permanent changes that will bring mob leaders to justice and stop future violence. We believe the majority of Indians want to live in peace and harmony, but our hearts are discouraged as we wait for meaningful action."

Due to the wave of violence, including arson which destroyed dozens of Christian homes last night in Kandhamal District, Orissa, Christian leaders are still unable to accurately estimate the loss of property and confirm names of dead or injured. During the last month, aicc collected reliable accounts of attacks in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, New Delhi, Karnataka, Kerala, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh. Many of the attacks were sporadic and appeared to be 'copycat' attacks after media documented the original violence in Orissa and breakdown in the rule of law. However, the widespread violence in Orissa and simultaneous attacks on Sunday, Sept. 14, 2008 in Karnataka were preplanned.

In light of continuing unrest and sporadic attacks, the aicc recommends the following:

1. Immediate deployment of India's army to Kandhamal District, Orissa.
2. Court proceedings by state governments, under Indian Penal Code 295A or other appropriate laws, against Hindu fundamentalist leaders who made inflammatory remarks to media which triggered spread of violence.
3. India's Prime Minister to lead a delegation to visit the victims in Orissa, the epicenter of the anti-Christian attacks.
4. Amendment of a presidential order, officially titled Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Order, 1950, to give legal recognition to Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims as 'Scheduled Castes'. This would allow assaults on these communities to be prosecuted under the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.
5. Any commissions established to investigate the violence should be headed by active, not retired, judges with a record of non-sectarian rulings.
6. Research and prompt release of white papers on conversions by state governments in all states with 'Freedom of Religion' laws (Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa) and Karnataka.
7. If state governments insist on investigation into foreign funding of Christian groups and organisations despite records already maintained by India's Ministry of Home Affairs, then studies must examine all non-profit organisations, regardless of religious affiliation.
8. Full and adequate compensation and justice for all the victims, including funding for rebuilding businesses and places of worship.
9. Establishment of a state commission for minorities in Orissa.

Dr. Udit Raj, National Chairman of All India Confederation of SC/ST Organisations, participated in the United Nations Human Rights Council session in Geneva from Sept. 9-17, 2008. He said, "Recent brutal attacks on Christians continue to remind us that religious intolerance and caste discrimination are synonymous. Right-wing Hindu organisations unleashed the violence against Christians. These attacks usually happen in areas where Dalits have embraced the Christian faith, built businesses, and improved their standards of living. I strongly urge all communities and parties to work together to establish justice and harmony while tackling the root issue – human rights for Dalits and other minorities." The All India Confederation of SC/ST Organisations is a partner with aicc.

Aicc is working with US-partner, the Dalit Freedom Network, to ensure United States authorities raise the issue of religious freedom with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during a visit to Washington, D.C. this week. D'souza said, "We were encouraged by the USCIRF letter and statements by U.S. officials. We're grateful to Indian-

Americans who have also shown their support for religious tolerance through protests such as a peace rally by the Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations of North America scheduled for 2 p.m. in Lafayette Square near the White House today.”

A letter dated Sept. 19, 2008, from the USCIRF (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom) asked President George W. Bush to urge the Indian central government to do more to stop violence against religious minority communities. The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan federal agency advising the U.S. Administration and legislature. A speech by Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, John Hanford, during the release of the 2008 U.S. Department of State International Religious Freedom report on Sept. 19, 2008, called on India’s authorities to protect religious freedom and preserve India’s long-standing tradition of religious tolerance.

Two events in India brought hope to the Christian community: good rulings by Orissa’s High Court on Aug. 27, 2008 and India’s Supreme Court on Sept. 3, 2008, which required the Orissa government to document its efforts to protect Christians; and the warning to protect citizens from “internal disturbance” given on Sept. 18, 2008, by the Central government to a few states, including Orissa, under Article 355 of India’s Constitution.

Sam Paul, aicc National Secretary of Public Affairs, said, “From history we know that the next battle will be fought in the court. Innocent Christians have been arrested by police and accused of revenge attacks or instigating mob violence. We will seek to free these people. At the same time, courts often endlessly delay trials for the true criminals or acquit them for alleged lack of evidence. If this happens, the Christian community and battered minorities will feel victimised yet again and increasingly disillusioned. We are deeply worried about how this could affect the future stability of our great nation.”

Most of the victims in Orissa were Dalits, formerly known as untouchables. Previously, the largest attack on Christians was in The Dangs District, Gujarat, when approximately 30 churches were burned over Christmas 1998 affecting tribal Christians.

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.## #