

Three months after start of India's unprecedented anti-Christian violence

Contributed by Correspondent
 Tuesday, 25 November 2008
 Last Updated Saturday, 20 December 2008

HYDERABAD – Nov. 25, 2008: Sparked by the murder of Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati on August 23, 2008, anti-Christian violence swept through the eastern state of Orissa during a bandh (strike) on August 25, 2008 and continued for almost two months. Today about 10,000 Christians – mostly Dalits and a few tribals – languish in state-run relief camps and are afraid to return home due to continuing threats by Hindu extremists. Maoist militants claimed responsibility for the swami’s murder, but rightwing Hindu groups blamed Christians and attacked Christians in 14 of 30 districts.

Today the All India Christian Council (aicc) announced it has reliable reports of 118 murdered Christians. Names, locations, and more details are available for 91; the remaining 27 are confirmed by reliable sources but bodies haven’t been identified. Previously, the confirmed death toll was 60 people. However, a fact finding report by an Indian political party estimated 500 deaths after interviews revealed many bodies were not recovered by authorities and some were cremated or buried clandestinely by attackers.

Dr. John Dayal, aicc Secretary General, said, “For thousands of displaced Dalit and tribal Christians in Kandhamal District, this will be their second Christmas spent in relief camps or hiding in the forests. Children couldn’t go to school for much of the year and their parents were unable to find steady work. Threats and coercion against Christian leaders continues unrestrained. We pray for peace and restoration of the rule of law, but the local Christian community is understandably pessimistic.” Hindu extremists targeted Christians in Kandhamal District between Dec. 24, 2007-Jan. 2, 2008.

Rev. P.R. Parichha, aicc Orissa chapter president, said, “Of the 54,000 displaced Christians, about 24,000 victims were in 14 government relief camps until some camps were closed and victims asked to return to their villages. However, due to ongoing threats of attacks and forced conversions, most victims fled to private relief camps in major cities of Orissa or bordering states. Many will never return home.” The aicc has provided blankets and other household items to thousands of victims in both private and government relief camps.

Dr. Joseph D’souza, aicc President, said, “Greater than the tragedy of violent attacks on innocent Christians is the ongoing travesty of justice in Orissa, Karnataka, and other states across India. We have not seen any ringleaders punished, and both the state and central government refuse to prosecute rightwing Hindu ultra-nationalists who incite violence against minorities. This impunity is disgraceful for the world’s largest democracy.”

The aicc hosted a fact finding visit by Baroness Caroline Cox of Queensbury in Greater London, a member of the British House of Lords, from Oct. 30-Nov. 4, 2008. She initiated a debate on India’s anti-Christian violence in the United Kingdom Parliament on Monday, Nov. 17, 2008.

Read the transcript here: <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.com/pa/ld200708/ldhansrd/text/81117-0001.htm#0811175000016>. She is also Chief Executive of HART (Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust). Read her report here: http://indianchristians.in/news/images/resources/pdf/2008_HART_UK_Orissa.pdf.

According to the Christian Legal Association of India, over 1,800 complaints about crimes including arson, assault, and murder were collected in the last three months. Aicc has assisted in collecting complaints from victims in relief camps. Lawyers made at least 800 of these into First Information Reports (FIRs) which are filed with police. Hundreds, including a few Christians, were arrested but most released on bail. Fast track courts, promised by the state government, are not functioning yet.

On Nov. 16, 2008, the Orissa government announced compensation ranging from Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 200,000 depending on the extent of damage and whether it was a church building or a “prayer hall”. This was in response to a decision on Oct. 22, 2008 by India’s Supreme Court on Writ Petition Civil, 404 of 2008 (Archbishop Raphael Cheenath S.V.D. vs. State of Orissa & ANR). When 105 churches from 15 denominations were vandalised over Christmas 2007, the state authorities refused to assess damaged churches and assist in rebuilding them. Only houses and educational or medical institutions were eligible for compensation. The first structures damaged in the attacks, Dalit businesses, did not receive any assistance.

D’souza said, “We will carefully track the rehabilitation efforts of the state authorities, but we are deeply skeptical at this point. In the past, state assessors categorized fully damaged houses as only partially damaged or endlessly delayed monetary compensation to victims. We’re worried the promise of assistance for churches will not match the reality.”

Dayal said, “The legal status of the Kui people, classified as Scheduled Tribe by the government, and the

demands of the Pano people, a Kui speaking tribe classified as Scheduled Caste or Dalit by the government, needs to be resolved. These are critical identity issues exploited by rightwing Hindu leaders in the region.”

Christian leaders are concerned over the progress of investigations by two state-appointed “commissions”. Each is comprised of a single retired Orissa High Court judge. Basudev Panigrahi continues to investigate the Dec. 2007 violence, and Sarat Chandra Mohapatra started an inquiry into the killing of swami Saraswati and subsequent communal violence. At the national level, the National Commission for Minorities issued a report in mid-September. India’s National Human Rights Commission sent an investigative team to Kandhamal, Orissa, from Nov. 12-18, 2008, although a public report is not expected.

Since Aug. 23, 2008, the aicc recorded: 315 villages damaged, 4,640 Christian houses burnt, 54,000 Christians homeless, at least 6 pastors and one Roman Catholic priest killed, 10 priests/pastors/nuns seriously injured, estimated 18,000 Christians injured, at least two women (including a nun) raped, 149 churches destroyed, 13 Christian schools and colleges damaged. Attacks mostly stopped in mid-October, but sporadic violence continues. On Nov. 12, 2008, local aicc leaders said a Catholic church was attacked in G. Udayagiri by a mob of about 200 people. Yesterday, Nov. 24, 2008, police imposed Section 144 in Daringbadi to prevent protests planned by a tribal leader with ties to anti-Christian attacks. Indian Penal Code Section 144 prohibits more than four people from gathering.

The All India Christian Council (www.christiancouncil.in), 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.