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Christians in India faced three attacks per week in 2009

Over 150 assaults reported, many in southern part of country

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct News (31.12.2009) / HRWF (04.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - After unprecedented large-scale attacks on Christians in the previous two years, 2009 brought hardly any respite as the minority faith faced an average of more than three violent attacks a week.

There were at least 152 attacks on Christians in 2009, according to the "Partial List of Major Incidents of Anti-Christian Violence in India" released by the Evangelical Fellowship of India.

"The trend of attacks on the Christian community by rightwing Hindu groups goes unabated," said Dr. Dominic Emmanuel, the spokesperson of the Delhi Catholic Archdiocese. "Overall, the Christian community still feels insecure."

Emmanuel also noted that none of the states that have "anti-conversion" laws have repealed them. The north-central states of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, Orissa in

the east, Gujarat in the west and Himachal Pradesh in the north have anti-conversion laws, which Hindu hardliners routinely use to arrest Christians on spurious accusations of "forcible conversion."

"If 2007 and 2008 went down in history as the most blood-soaked ones in the history of modern Christianity in India, 2009 surely rates as the year of frustrating confrontations with the law and tardy governance and on justice for the victims of communal violence," said Dr. John Dayal, a Christian and human rights activist and member of the government's National Integration Council.

Dayal referred to violence that erupted in Orissa's Kandhamal district during the Christmas week in 2007, killing at least four Christians and burning 730 houses and 95 churches. The attacks were carried out to avenge an alleged attack on a Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council or VHP) leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati.

Violence re-erupted in Kandhamal in August 2008 after the assassination of Saraswati by a Maoist group, as rightwing Hindu groups falsely blamed Christians for it. This time, the violence killed more than 100 people and resulted in the incineration of 4,640 houses, 252 churches and 13 educational institutions.

No Longer a Haven

A disturbing new trend emerged this year as southern India, which had long been considered a haven for Christians, recorded the highest incidence of anti-Christian violence. Of the total 152 incidents, 86 were reported from southern states, mainly Karnataka with 48, Andhra Pradesh with 29, Tamil Nadu with five and Kerala with four.

Northern and central states, seen as the stronghold of rightwing Hindu extremists, recorded 42 incidents of violence, half the number in the south.

There were 15 attacks in Madhya Pradesh state, 14 in neighboring Chhattisgarh, three each in Uttar Pradesh and the Himalayan states of Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir, and one each in the national capital Delhi and neighboring Haryana state.

In the west, seven attacks were reported: six in Maharashtra and one in Gujarat.

In the northeast, four attacks were reported: three in Assam and one in Manipur.

Karnataka recorded the highest number of violent incidents as the first-ever victory of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the state elections in 2007 emboldened rightwing Hindu extremist groups. Karnataka became the first southern state with a stand-alone BJP government in the history of India.

Anti-Christian violence in Andhra Pradesh rose to new heights after a Christian, Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, became the chief minister of the state in May 2004. To target him politically, rightwing Hindu groups attacked Christians while accusing them of converting Hindus to Christianity. This year Reddy died on Sept. 2 in a chopper crash.

The incidence of Christian persecution in the north and the central states declined apparently due to the BJP's defeat in the April-May general elections and a growing realization among a section of the BJP leadership that violent incidents no longer please voters. But the hard-line section of the BJP and groups linked to the party, such as the VHP and its youth wing Bajrang Dal, carried on with their hardcore anti-Christian stand.

Impunity in Orissa

Orissa state in the east, which witnessed two massive spates of attacks on Christians in 2007 and 2008, saw only two recorded violent incidents this year.

The morale of Christians in Orissa, however, remained low as few assailants in the 2008 rampage were brought to justice.

"The courts in Kandhamal make a mockery of the judicial process, and the murderers lord it over the witnesses and victims while judges and law look on," Dayal said. "The church remains helpless, its puny effort at giving strength to the witnesses falling far too short."

Of 787 cases registered by Orissa police, 100 are being handled by two-fast track courts in Kandhamal. Around 35 cases have been heard, resulting in around 50 convictions and more than 190 acquittals. Manoj Pradhan, a legislator for the BJP, has been exonerated "for lack of evidence" in six cases, most of them involving murder charges.

Dr. Sajan K. George, national president of the Global Council of Indian Christians, said the growing number of acquittals was producing a culture of impunity, "where those who commit crimes against Christian minority do not fear punishment by law."

"As the elected representative of the Orissa state assembly [Pradhan] has been let off in murder cases," George said. "People want to know what has happened to the long arms of justice."

Dayal, who was in Kandhamal recently, said that of the more than 4,640 houses burned in 2008 violence, only 200 have a roof over the rebuilt walls as 2009 ends.

"And perhaps at the end of the next year, another 2,500, God willing, will have been rebuilt," he said. "But around 2,000 houses will even then remain unfinished."

Dayal added that more than 20,000 men, women and children of Kandhamal continue to live as refugees or homeless people in various cities, working at odd jobs and sometimes begging.

"Some girls have already been pushed into the evil of human trafficking," he said.

Most people in Kandhamal remain without jobs, and the rehabilitation process, in which the church is participating, still is a long distance from covering all victims, Dayal said, adding, "The state government seems to have called it a day with the barest minimum done in this sector."

Emmanuel of the Delhi Archdiocese said that since the BJP is not in power at the federal level, some of their front organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sang, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal will harass Christians in order to remain in the news.

"Christianity teaches us to hope in God," Emmanuel said. "We can only hope that 2010 will be a better year for Christians, but in practical terms it really does not appear that things would be any better as the ranks of rightwing Hindu fundamentalists keep their pressure."

There are around 24 million Christians in India, or roughly 2.3 percent of the over 1.1 billion people.

Recent incidents of persecution

By Mahruaii Sailo and Binaifer Wadia

Compass Direct (23.12.2009) / HRWF (22.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Andhra Pradesh, December 23 (Compass Direct News) - Hindu extremists from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh on Dec. 20 seriously injured a pastor and beat his wife in Decarakonda, Nalgonda. At about 7:30 p.m., Pastor R. Timothy, his wife Nirmala and their child were on their way to a neighboring village when the Hindu extremists stopped them and attacked them, reported the Global Council of Indian Christians. They hit the pastor on his head with an iron rod and beat his wife on her left leg. The pastor was bleeding profusely when passersby saw him and called an ambulance. He received hospital treatment, including five stitches on his head. A local Christian leader filed a police complaint against the extremists at Nalgonda town police station, and a First Information Report was registered against the assailants. No arrest had been made at press time. - MS

Karnataka - Police on Dec. 20 arrested eight Christians after Hindu extremists filed a complaint of forceful conversion against them in Madugere, Tumkur. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that police arrested pastors N. Nagesh, Joshua Abraham and one identified only as Jilani, along with five other church members, as they were heading toward a nearby area after Sunday worship. The Christians were accused of forceful conversion and charged under Sections 295-A and 153 of the Indian Penal Code for "malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class" and "giving provocation with intent to create riot" respectively, and they were locked up in Madugere jail. With local Christian leaders' intervention, they were released on bail on Dec 21. - MS

Karnataka - Police in Chikmagalur district on Dec. 19 disrupted a Christmas service of Christ Fellowship Church and falsely accused a pastor of forcible conversion. The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported that officials of Lingadahalli police station, acting on a false complaint from the Hindu extremists of the Bajrang Dal, barged into the house church and verbally abused the 80 Christians present, asking them if they were being given promises of money to convert. Police then told Pastor S. David to accompany them to the police station. A GCIC coordinator told Compass that officers questioned David for nearly 90 minutes. They sent him away after warning him of possible attacks from extremists if he conducted such large services at the house church. - BW

Karnataka - Police arrested a Christian after Hindu extremists filed a baseless complaint against him of forceful conversion on Dec. 15 in Mandhya. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported a person identified only as Srinivas beat B. Bhaskar of a Brethren Assemblies fellowship after finding him praying for a sick friend in a hospital; Srinivas later alerted an area leader and member of the Hindu extremist Rashtiya Swamyamsevak Sangh. As is customary in India, police arrested the victim instead of the aggressor; Bhaskar was arrested under Section 153-A of the Indian Penal Code for "promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion." He was sent to Mandhya jail and was released on bail on Dec. 17 with local Christian leaders' intervention. - MS

Karnataka - Police on Dec. 14 arrested a pastor and his wife after Hindu nationalist extremists beat them and filed a false complaint of forcible conversion in K.R. Nagara-Mysore. The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported that at 10:30 a.m. nearly 15 extremists from the Bajrang Dal stormed into a house church, verbally abused Pastor Herurer Manjunath, slapped him repeatedly and accused him without basis of forcible conversion. They also slapped his wife, Saraswati. The intolerant Hindus broke two chairs and tore up some Christian literature in an attack that lasted for nearly 45 minutes. After they left, Manjunath went to the local police station to file a complaint, but instead officers charged Manjunath and Saraswati under various sections of the Indian Penal Code. A GCIC coordinator told Compass that both were not released on bail until Dec. 18. - BW

Karnataka – Police on Dec. 14 detained Christians in Kodagu district after falsely accusing them of converting people in local tribal villages. The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported that Thimmappa Rammana invited independent Pastor Benedict Sunil to his rented home in Ammathi village, about eight kilometers (five miles) from Gonikoppal, Virajpet Taluk, for a service of around 100 Christians. At around 11:30 a.m., Ammathi police arrived, insulting those present and falsely accusing the pastor of forcibly converting local tribal villagers. They questioned many about their faith and inquired whether they had permission from the landlord to conduct such a meeting. A local GCIC coordinator told Compass that police took Rammana, Sunil and 11 other Christians to the police station for further questioning, later transferring them to the Virajpet Rural police station where they were detained for a few hours. Sub-Inspector Santosh Kumar of the Ammathi Police outpost told Compass that he had received complaints from villagers that conversion activities were taking place at Rammana's house – as if conversion were illegal in India – so he had sent officers to bring them to police outposts and warn them of the complaints. He added that, as a preventive measure to avoid future clashes, he advised Rammana against conducting prayer meetings in his house. – BW

Karnataka – On Dec. 12 in Bangalore, police detained a pastor and choir members of City St. Paul Methodist Church after Hindu extremists from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh accused them of forceful conversion. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that the extremists arriving in Jeeps and on motorbikes stopped the choir members on their way home from visiting a church member's home. They verbally abused the Christians. An area police inspector reached the site and took the pastor and choir members to the police station for questioning. Only with local Christian leaders' intervention were the Christians released at 4 a.m. – MS

Andhra Pradesh – Hindu extremists accused a pastor of forceful conversion and beat him on Dec. 9 in Kistapuram, Mahabubnagar, according to the All Indian Christian Council. Accusing Pastor Ninanapu Moses of forceful conversion, members of the Hindu extremist Bajrang Dal at about 8 p.m. attacked a prayer meeting led by Pastor Moses, verbally abused the Christians and beat them. The pastor received hospital treatment for internal injuries. Local Christian leaders filed a police complaint, but no arrests had been made at press time. – MS

Karnataka – Hindu extremists from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh on Dec. 9 accused Christians of forceful conversion in Chikballapur. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that at about 2 p.m. the extremists stormed into the prayer meeting held at the home of a pastor identified only as Joseph. In attendance was Pastor Franklin Prabakar and church members from Grace Gospel Church. At about 1:30 p.m., the extremists stopped the prayer meeting, threatened the Christians and accused them of forceful conversion. Alerted by the extremists, Chikballapur Kasaba police arrived at the spot and took eight Christians to a local police station. The Christians were released at 11 p.m. later that night. – MS

Haryana – Hindu extremists from the Bajrang Dal on Dec. 7 accused the operator of an orphanage of trying to forcefully convert street children to Christianity by providing shelter and food in Faridabad, Haryana, sources said. The extremists stormed the charitable trust orphanage home run by B.K. Mishra at about 7 p.m. and severely beat him, smashed his car and pressured the police to arrest him. Black and blue from the beating, Mishra sustained injuries on his face, back and legs, the sources said. Police refused to register a case against the attackers, and the home was closed down due to the extremists' pressure. – MS

Karnataka – Local Hindu extremists on Dec. 6 accused Pastor C. John Christopher, a leader of Grace Gospel Church Saythagiri in Anekal, near Bangalore, of forceful conversion, and Anekal police issued him a warning. The police barged into the church's

Sunday worship, searched the premises and took the pastor to the police station. Officers asked the pastor to submit his license for conducting worship meetings, as well as church property documents, and the pastor submitted the required papers. No case was filed against the pastor, but police warned him not to conduct future Christian meetings. – MS

Karnataka – Hindu extremists accused a Christian teacher of forceful conversion and disrupted her class on Dec. 2 in Mandhya. The Global Council of Indian Christian reported that Hindu extremists entered the classroom of Gangothri Vadovasthan at Chikanahalli Government Primary School at about 2 p.m., falsely accused her of trying to forcibly convert the students to Christianity and verbally abused her in front of them. They also insulted the school authority for appointing a Christian teacher. The Hindu extremists filed a complaint against the Christian at Harakeri police station. School administrators forced Vadovasthan to take leave from the school due to the extremists' pressure. – MS

Andhra Pradesh – Police on Nov. 24 detained a Christian worker from Australia, Paul Jemison, on baseless charges of "forceful conversion" in Utnur. The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported that at 7:30 p.m. Jemison had gone to the Industrial Training Institute campus for the screening of a film for about 200 students, after which he began telling about Christ to students. Nearly 20 Hindu nationalist extremists arrived and accused him of "forceful conversion," speaking derogatorily of his foreign origin. They forced Jemison to a police station, where they filed the complaint of "forceful conversions to Christianity" against him. A representative of the Adilabad Division of the All India Christian Council said Bharatiya Janata Party leader Sriram Nayak had complained to police after being alerted by District Tribal Welfare Officer Dasarath Nayak. A GCIC coordinator told Compass that Jemison was detained in the station until late that night and then released. Additionally, extremists warned a local pastor identified only as Premanandam, as well as his daughter, not to invite any more foreign workers to the town. – BW, MS

Christmas season attacks worry Christians in India

Hindu extremists launch two assaults and claim hundreds of "reconversions."

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (22.12.2009) / HRWF (23.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – With at least two violent attacks and alleged "reconversion" of over 1,700 Christians in the week leading up to Christmas, a sense of fear is growing among India's minority Christian community.

On Sunday (Dec. 20), Hindu extremists attacked a church during worship in western Maharashtra state's Sindhudurg district and a Christmas exhibition in Gwalior city in central Madhya Pradesh state. The following day, extremists claimed having converted over 1,700 tribal (aboriginal) Christians "back" to Hinduism in western Gujarat state.

"Christmas is a favorite time for violence against Christians in India, as it intimidates the Christian community at large," said Dr. John Dayal, member of the government's National Integration Council, headed by Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh.

Dayal pointed out that the first mass attack on Christians in India took place in Gujarat's Dangs district during Christmas in 1998, setting the stage for future attacks through the season.

"Then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee [of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP] went to see the damage [in Dangs], but instead of commiserating

with the victims, he called for a national debate on conversions," Dayal said. "That political philosophy has been behind the festive season attacks on the Christian community."

The Rev. Anand Muttungal of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Madhya Pradesh said the attacks around Christmas could be a reaction to increased and favorable coverage of Christians and churches in newspapers and television channels during the festival season. "Rightwing extremists cannot tolerate this, and they cannot stop it either," he said. "So, in frustration, they launch attacks."

On Christmas Eve of 2007, eastern Orissa's Kandhamal district witnessed a massive spate of anti-Christian attacks that killed at least four Christians and burned 730 houses and 95 churches.

Arson in Madhya Pradesh

The assailants in the Dec. 20 attack in Madhya Pradesh state have been identified as members of the extreme rightwing outfit Bajrang Dal. Muttungal said members of the Hindu extremist group shouted Hindu slogans and burned artwork depicting biblical scenes at an annual Christmas fair organized by the Catholic Church in Gwalior city.

The mayor of Gwalior had inaugurated the two-day fair on Saturday (Dec. 19), and it was organized with due permission from authorities, he said.

"The incident has spread panic among Christians in the state," reported Indian Catholic, a news portal run by the Catholic Church in India.

The portal quoted Archbishop Leo Cornelio of Bhopal as saying that the attack "is a matter of serious concern for Christians, especially when we are preparing to celebrate Christmas."

Three of the attackers were arrested, and two of them were sent to judicial custody by a local court.

Also on Sunday (Dec. 20), around 60 men barged into the New Life Fellowship (NLF) church in Kankauli area in Maharashtra's Sindhudurg district and beat the pastor, his wife and a few other Christians, according to NLF Pastor Atul Bhole. The church meets at the privately owned Anant Hotel in Kankauli.

"The attackers, all men, accused us of converting Hindus," the 37-year-old pastor told Compass. "Then they beat us, including my wife, with their hands and legs. My back is still in pain."

The attackers were allegedly led by a local leader of the Hindu extremist Shiv Sena party, identified as Vaibhav Naik. Also taking a lead role in the attack was a local leader of the ruling Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Rupesh Nagrekar.

The NCP is part of the ruling state coalition with the Congress Party. As policy, both parties renounce the Hindu nationalist ideology of the opposition Shiv Sena party and its ally the BJP. But involvement of local leaders of the two "secular" parties is not uncommon in Maharashtra.

An official from the Kankauli police station said police were on the lookout for the attackers, and that they would be arrested soon.

A Christian from the NLF church said police were initially reluctant to take action against the attackers.

"The police warned us against 'conversions,' as if the allegations made against us were true," the Christian said. "Only after Dr. Abraham Mathai from the Maharashtra State Minorities Commission intervened did the police show interest in prosecuting the attackers."

'Reconversions' in Gujarat

Following these two attacks, yesterday (Dec. 21) Hindu extremist group Shree Sampraday Seva Samiti (Service Committee of the Hindu sect Shree Sampraday) claimed to have "reconverted" 1,747 people to Hinduism in Gujarat state's Surat city, reported The Times of India newspaper.

"The camp to reconvert tribals, who had embraced Christianity, was held in the city for the first time, and nearly 5,000 people from Maharashtra and Gujarat participated in the ceremony," the newspaper reported.

About 10 Hindu priests chanted mantras at a fire ritual, around which sat those willing to "get back" to Hinduism, it stated, adding that participants were given a meditation word and sacred thread to mark their "reconversion."

"We organized the event in Surat to promote Hinduism in urban areas," one of the organizers, Yashwant More, told the newspaper. "We have a series of events planned in the near future to hold such reconversion camps in urban areas of Gujarat. In January, events are planned in Vadodara and Silvassa."

Gujarat has an anti-conversion law, known as the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act, which mandates all those seeking to convert, as well as clergy involved in any "conversion ceremony," to seek prior permission from district authorities. No permission was sought for the event, noted the newspaper.

Christians complain that anti-conversion laws, in force in four other states including Madhya Pradesh, have been enacted only to harass Christians and are rarely used against Hindu nationalist groups.

Sociologists say that India's tribal peoples, who have long practiced their own ethnic faiths, are not Hindus. Hindu nationalists are active mainly in tribal regions to "Hinduize" local villagers and repel conversions to other faiths.

Many reports of "reconversions," however, have been found to be false. In 2007, Hindi-language daily Punjab Kesari reported that four Christian families in Nahan town, in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, had "reconverted" to Hinduism. But a fact-finding team of the All India Christian Council revealed that none of the members of those families had ever converted to Christianity.

More than 80 percent of India's 1.1 billion people are Hindus; Christians make up a meager 2.3 percent of the population.

Opposition and attacks will not dampen the spirit of Christmas, said Dayal.

"The birth of Christ is a harbinger of salvation, and this salvific promise goads us on to celebrate Christmas without fear," he said. "We will not be cowed, or scared, or intimidated into retracting from our faith and from celebrating the birth of the Messiah."

40th Sikh Jatha arrested at Talwandi Sabo

Sikhsiyasat (20.12.2009) / HRWF (21.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - 40th Jatha comprising 11 Sikhs was arrested here today by the District Police, while they were heading towards dera Salabatpura, Punjab head quarter of dera sauda sirsa (DSS). DSS head Gurmeet Ram Rahim is accused for blasphemy and this sect is declared as anti-Sikh by the collective decision of Sikh Panth.

Accusing that Punjab government is patronizing the vicious activates of DSS, the Sikh struggling organizations like Shiromani Akali Dal (Panch Pardhani), Ek Noor Khalsa Fauj, Guru Granth Sahib Satikar Sabha (Haryana) and Malwa Tarna Dal have launched a morcha (peaceful agitation) to seek closure of Salabatpura branch of dera sauda.

Today, 40th Jatha left for dera Salabatpura after performing prayers at Takhat Damdama Sahib. But all the members where arrested by the Police before they could reach Salabatpura.

"Dera salabatpura is now a symbol of evil for Sikhs as this is the place where dera sauda head held his drama on 11 May 2007." said Mata Malkeet Kaur, a leader of Bathinda unit of Panch Pardhani. "Sikhs will not let this dera to continue with its' activities" she added.

India: ethnic violence and religious extremism on the rise, in five years over 3800 cases

AsiaNews (15.12.2009) / HRWF (16.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - In the last five years, India has seen a sharp increase in violence provoked by religious and ethnic diversity. These are the findings from a report submitted by Ajay Maken, Minister of State for Home Affairs, to the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of Parliament in New Delhi.

Over the past five years extremist attacks number more than 3800. The report refers only to those detected by the authorities, but the real number could be much higher. From the 677 cases registered in 2004 it has passed, in a gradual crescendo, to 943 in 2008. The report says that 11 Union States registered no cases during 2009, but despite this the country is marked by an average of two attacks per day. Member States lead the sad standings are Maharashtra (681), Madhya Pradesh (654) and Uttar Pradesh (613).

The report on the violence of religious and ethnic radicalism came to the Rajya Sabha in the wake of the review of special law, known as the Communal Violence Bill 2005, which is once again at the centre of political debate after the recent wave of attacks against religious minorities, particularly Christians in Orissa and Muslims in Gujarat.

While the government of New Delhi is studying new judicial and police tools to stem the flow of these episodes, the victims of violence complain about the inaction of the institutions and continuing insecurity.

The case of Orissa is the most striking. At a meeting December 7 in Berhampur, Christian leaders, human rights activists and residents of Kandhamal took stock of the situation: more than 5 thousand houses burned or looted, nearly 300 churches destroyed, more than 50 thousand displaced people and nearly 2 500 complaints of which only 823 registered by the police authorities.

The victims of the pogroms doubt positive verdicts in trials and the complete disbursement of compensation promised by the authorities (to date the distribution of

compensation for the violence in 2007 has yet to be completed). That is why they created the Sampradayik Hinsa Prapidita Sangathana, an Association of victims of violent extremism, with the support of the Catholic bishops of Bhubaneswar and Berhampur, the evangelical bishop of Bardhan and organizations like All India Christian Council and Human Rights Law Network.

The unresolved problems are many: from the slow pace of rebuilding homes and churches, to the insecurity in which Christians in the region are still forced to live today. The Sampradayik Hinsa Prapidita Sangathana designed to monitor the individual needs of victims, is promoting projects to help especially women and children and to act together as a united front to put pressure on the civil authorities.

Hindu nationalist party official in India charged in nun's rape

Local politician of Bharatiya Janata Party had attended Christian school

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (11.12.2009) / HRWF (13.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Police in Orissa state have arrested an official of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for allegedly leading an attack that ended in the rape of a Catholic nun during last year's anti-Christian mayhem in Kandhamal district.

Officers in the eastern state of Orissa had been searching for Gururam Patra, identified by local residents as the general secretary of the BJP in Kandhamal district, for more than 14 months. Arrested on Saturday (Dec. 6) in Balliguda, Patra was charged with leading the attack but not with rape.

Dilip Kumar Mohanty, an investigating officer, told Compass that a non-bailable warrant had been issued against Patra, accused of being "the main organizer" of the attack on Aug. 25, 2008, in which then-28-year-old Sister Meena Lalita Barwa said she was gang-raped.

Mohanty said he had gathered "sufficient evidence" against Patra.

"He is the one who went into the house where the nun was staying and took her out, along with his associates who outraged her modesty," Mohanty said.

Previously police had arrested 18 associates of Patra.

The Rev. Ajay Singh of the Catholic Archdiocese of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar told Compass that Patra had become a "terror" for local Christians, as "he was threatening against [those] identifying the accused in numerous cases."

Violence in Kandhamal took place in August-September 2008, killing more than 100 people - mostly hacked to death or burned alive - and incinerating more than 4,500 houses, as well as destroying over 250 churches and 13 educational institutions. The violence began after a VHP leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, was killed by Maoists (extreme Marxists) on Aug. 23. Hindu extremist groups wrongly blamed local Christians for the assassination.

A local Christian from K. Nuagaon village, where the nun said she was raped, told Compass on condition of anonymity that Patra was the general secretary of the BJP for Kandhamal district. But the BJP and its ideological mentor, the Hindu nationalist

conglomerate Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps or RSS), were reluctant to admit association with him.

Suresh Pujari, president of the Orissa state BJP, told Compass that he did not know if Patra was a member of his party.

"I have heard his name, but I have never met him," he said. "The BJP is a big organization, and I cannot know everyone."

RSS spokesperson Manmohan Vaidya told Compass that Patra was a block president (a local government position) in Balliguda during the violence.

"He may have attended a few meetings of the RSS, but he was never associated with the organization officially," he said.

Investigating officer Mohanty said police have yet to establish his affiliations, but "it appears that he was from the RSS group." Mohanty said Patra was not accused of rape but of being the main leader of the attack.

On Nov. 11, Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, told the state assembly House that 85 people from the RSS, 321 members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council or VHP) and 118 workers of the Bajrang Dal, youth wing of the VHP, were rounded up by the police for the attacks in Kandhamal.

Educated by Christians

Union Catholic Asian News (UCAN) agency reported Patra attended a Catholic school, Vijaya High School, in Raikia town in Kandhamal district.

The news agency quoted the Rev. Mathew Puthyadam, principal of the school when Patra attended, as saying that he was a good student and respected the priests.

"I really wonder how he changed," Puthyadam told UCAN.

UCAN reported that Puthyadam said right-wing Hindu groups commonly recruit people educated at Christian schools and indoctrinate them against Christians. There were a few other former students of Catholic schools who also led mobs that attacked Christians in Kandhamal, he added.

Puthyadam reportedly said that when Patra's mother brought him to the school, she said he lost his father in early childhood and they had no money to continue his studies; the priest arranged sponsorship through a Christian aid agency to cover his fees and lodging at Bishop Tobar Hostel.

'Police Refused to Help'

It was during these attacks that Barwa of the Divyajyoti Pastoral Centre in K. Nuagaon area in Balliguda, said she was attacked and raped.

At an Oct. 24, 2008 press conference, the nun said 40 to 50 people attacked the house in which she and priest Thomas Chellanthyarayil were staying; he also was attacked in the Aug. 25 incident. She said the assailants first slapped and threatened her, then took her out of the house.

"There were three men who first threatened to throw me into the smoldering fire," she said. "Then they threw me on the veranda [which was] full of plastic pieces. One of them tore my blouse and undergarments. While one man stood on my right hand, the other stood on my left hand and the third man raped me."

Another man tried to rape her as she got up, she said, and when a mob arrived she was able to hide behind a staircase. But the mob pulled her out and threatened to kill her while others wanted to parade her naked in the street.

"They then beat me up with their hands," she said. "I was made to walk on the streets wearing my petticoat and sari, as my blouse was torn by one of the attackers. When we reached the market place I saw two policemen there. I asked them to help me, but they refused."

When the nun filed a complaint at the Balliguda police station, she said, police made no arrests until The Hindu newspaper highlighted her case on Sept. 30, 2008.

Christian leader John Dayal, a member of India's National Integration Council, said the government has yet to fully address violence against Christians.

"The administration, civil and police, have to act with their full strength to stop the hate campaign that has been unleashed in the last one year, and which has penetrated distant villages, creating schism and hatred between communities," he said.

On Sunday (Dec. 7) Christians and rights activists formed a new organization, the Association of Victims of Communal Violence in Kandhamal in Phulbani to deal with the growing communal divide in Kandhamal.

"The major task of the new association, working closely with clergy and civil society activists irrespective of religion, is to restore public confidence and to ensure that the victims and witnesses felt safe enough to depose in court," said Dayal.

He said Christian leaders hope this grassroots initiative will also help in the process of reconciliation and allow people to go back to their villages, where right-wing groups are threatening them with death if they do not convert to Hinduism.

Dayal also said there were rumors of human trafficking in Kandhamal, and that the new association felt special projects for women and especially young girls were urgently required.

"I pray they remain rumors," he added.

Hindu extremists set fire to church in Andhra Pradesh

Nirmala Carvalho

AsiaNews (11.12.2009) / HRWF (14.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Hindu extremists have set fire to an Evangelical church in the village of Metpally, Karimnagar district in Andhra Pradesh, the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported. The attack took place in the early hours of last Tuesday.

Local sources said a group of militants from the Hindu nationalist movement Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to the Jesus Lights Manna Church in Metpally around 2 am. After pouring petrol on the building, they set it on fire.

Most of the structure was damaged. A preliminary report said that the building's main entrance door, the altar, window panels, church amplifier, service books and Bibles were burnt to ashes.

After being informed around 4 am by some witnesses of what had happened, the church's pastor, Rev Mengu Elia, filed a first information report or FIR against Hindu radicals. Within 24 hours, the local BJP leader, Gangaram, was arrested along with other individuals involved in the fire.

The Metpally incident occurred in a region where a 48-hour strike was under way called by the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) in support of demands for the separation of the Telangana region from Andhra Pradesh (see "Telangana, a new Indian state, is given go ahead," by CT Nilesh", in AsiaNews, 10 December 2009).

The GCIC said that Hindu extremists were lucky because the attack against Jesus Lights Manna Church was initially blamed on the Telangana separatist movement.

Sajan K George, national president of the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC), said that his organisation "has documented 21 cases of anti-Christian attacks in the State of Andhra Pradesh."

Many are against house churches used by non-denominational Christian pastors with a large following among Dalits.

These buildings "are routinely torched [. . .] , believers thrashed and often detained for hours in the police station, while outside the fundamentalists shout Hindu devotional slogans."

According to the GCIC president, in Andhra Pradesh the "security of places of worship should be ensured" because "the vulnerable minority Christian community" continues to be targeted.

Recent incidents of persecution

By Mahruaii Sailo, Binaifer Wadia and Shireen Bhatia

Compass Direct (30.11.2009) / HRWF (01.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Police on Nov. 24 detained three Christians after Hindu extremists falsely accused them of forced conversion in Raghavendra Colony, Madugere, Tumkur district. The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported that 35 to 40 extremists barged into the rented apartment of Christians identified only as Prabhu, Steven and Shivananda, all workers for Operation Mobilization (OM). The Hindu hardliners confiscated all Bibles, compact discs and gospel tracts and burned them, and then took the Christians to the Madugere police station. Police who searched the apartment found no evidence of forcible conversion, however, and offered protection to the Christians. The next day the extremists again stormed into the apartment, dragging the three Christians outside. Nearby police took the Christians to the police station, along with the OM director, who had rushed to help them, and nearly 40 Hindu extremists followed demanding that the Christians be arrested for "conversion activities," mistakenly believing that conversion is illegal in India. A GCIC representative told Compass the Christians were detained till midnight and released without being charged - after agreeing to vacate the apartment and immediately leave the village. - BW

Karnataka - Based on a false complaint by Hindu extremists, police detained five pastors on baseless charges of forceful conversion on Nov. 24 in Nangli, Kolar district. The Evangelical Fellowship of India reported that Hindu extremists stormed into the inauguration of the Friends Missionary Prayer Band prayer hall, and police alerted by the extremists arrived and took the five pastors to the police station for questioning. The

Christians were released at about 8:30 p.m. after agreeing to give police prior notice of any worship services as a security measure. – MS

Madhya Pradesh – About 20 Hindu extremists attacked a pastor in Balaghat on Nov. 24. Pastor Ghanshyam Chowkse of Jeevan Jyoti Ashram was visiting a local Christian family when the extremists broke into the house of Purnima Dhuarey and dragged the pastor out, striking him with their fists and legs. They also struck Dhuarey with their hands. Pastor Kamlesh Nagpure told Compass that the mob was carrying a gas container with them, intending to burn Pastor Chowkse alive, and he said Pastor Chowkse was traumatized for days afterward. The extremists were members of the Bajrang Dal, the right-wing youth wing of the Hindu extremist Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council). Dhuarey was also attacked and beaten four months ago for recently converting to Christianity. She and Pastor Chowkse have filed two separate First Information Reports at the local police station. Dhuarey named the extremists in her FIR as she was able to recognize them, but Pastor Chowkse reported only unidentified men. “No major proceedings have yet taken place in both the cases,” Pastor Nagpure told Compass. – SB

Karnataka – Hindu extremists from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) falsely accused Pastor K. Manjunath of forceful conversion, verbally abused him and stopped construction of his church on Nov. 12 in Shimoga. Pastor Manjunath had received approval from the government to construct the church building, which is registered under the Bhadravati Municipality. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that the extremists filed a complaint against the pastor with the Shimoga Development Authority, which issued a show-cause notice asking him to answer the complaint. After investigating, police allowed construction of the church building to continue. – MS

Karnataka – About 20 Hindu extremists beat two Christians on Nov. 10 in Attibele, Karnataka. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that Chandrachari Gangadhari and Chandra Gowda were visiting Christian homes when the intolerant Hindus verbally abused, beat them and burned Bibles and gospel tracts. Gowda sustained internal injuries. As is customary in India, police detained the victims rather than the aggressors, holding the Christians at the police station until 11 p.m. and joining the extremists in warning them not to return to the village. – MS

Chhattisgarh – About 50 Hindu extremists stormed a prayer meeting and beat Christians until one fell unconscious on Nov. 8 in Bliaspur. A Christian identified only as Tekchand invited a couple, Keshup and Sangeeta Baghel, to their house to pray for their sick child when the extremists broke in and beat the Christians. Tekchand fell unconscious. The extremists dragged the couple to the police station, and along with about 100 other Hindu hardliners tried to pressure the police into filing baseless charges of forceful conversion. On hearing of the incident, four Christians went to the police station, where the extremists beat them on their arrival. Tekchand filed a police complaint against the intolerant Hindus, and the Christians were taken to the police station for medical checkup. The Christians were released at about 3 a.m. that night. – MS

Karnataka – Police on Nov. 1 entered a children’s hostel run by Christian Outreach Ministries (COM) in Udupi and arrested the manager on baseless charges of forceful conversion. Saroja Margaret was sent to Mangalore District Prison after a magistrate ruled against judicial custody and was released on bail on Nov. 3. The Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) reported that Margaret and her husband, the Rev. Joseph Jamkandi, were shocked to learn that two girls who had sought shelter for four months beginning in June had supposedly accused them of forceful conversion and of criticizing Hinduism. After the girls, identified only as Megha and Shilpika, had visited their parents in Madikere, their parents and Hindu extremists filed a complaint at Kapu police station charging that Margaret had forced the children to read the Bible and had criticized Hinduism. Police questioning the remaining 63 girls and others at the hostel, as well as

neighbors, did not find anyone offering any statements to support the accusations, according to EFI. The hostel provides shelter, food and clothing to 65 girls from various castes and religious backgrounds. EFI reported that the remaining 63 girls told police there was never an instance when they were forced to read the Bible or participate in Christian devotion, and they said criticism of any religion was never uttered in the hostel. Nevertheless, the Deputy Superintendent of Police on Nov. 1 told Kapu police to present Margaret before a magistrate, as the Hindu hardliners had filed a First Information Report. Margaret was arrested for "uttering words with intent to hurt religious feelings of others" (Section 298 of the Indian Penal Code) and for "creating problems in the community" (Section 153 Part 1-b). – MS

Maharashtra – In Pune, a Christian identified only as Sanjeev was beaten by about 60 students at Ferguson College on Oct. 27 for leading a Bible study. A source reported that Sanjeev was proclaiming Christ to two students at their request when the attacking students came from different directions and began beating him; they berated him for preaching and informed the college principal of his activities. The principal filed a complaint against Sanjeev for trespassing and "hurting the religious sentiments" of the students. Police took the Christian into custody, seizing Bibles and Christian literature from him. With local Christian leaders' intervention, he was released without charge. – MS

Andhra Pradesh – Hindu extremists pressured Christians to recant their faith and convert back to Hinduism on Oct. 27 in West Singhbhum, Jharkhand. The All India Christian Council reported that representatives of the Hindu extremist Adivasi Maha Sabha, along with village leaders, disrupted a prayer meeting and threatened to cut all economic and community ties from the Christians if they did not obey their demand to return to Hinduism. The extremists took away the handle of a water pump that served as the only source of water for the Christians. Police refused to register a First Information Report on the incident but assured the Christians that they would investigate. The village water pump has been repaired. – MS

Karnataka – Hindu extremists on Oct. 23 claimed that a church building in Ankola, Karwar district was used as a center for forceful conversion. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that the extremists also accused Christians there of cheating poor people and disturbing the neighborhood with their prayers. The extremist leaders went to the home of the owner of the land on which the church building is built, Shankar Naik, and reprimanded him for allowing it to remain open. The extremists filed a baseless complaint of forceful conversion with the local administrator, who in turn filed a police complaint against Naik. Due to extremist pressure, police forced Naik to shut down the building, threatening to arrest him if he opened it again. The Christians there now worship in the house of area pastor. – MS

Recent incidents of persecution

By Binaifer Wadia and Shireen Bhatia

Compass Direct (17.11.2009) / HRWF (18.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Police on Nov. 8 detained Christians based on false allegations of "allurement to conversion" in Yadunandan Nagar, near Bilaspur. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that at 8:45 p.m., nearly 150 locals stormed the house where a prayer service led by Kesboram Bhagel and his sister-in-law, Sangeetha Daniel, was taking place for a sick boy. Led by Hindu extremists from the Dharam Sena and Bajrang Dal shouting "Jai Shri Ram [Hail Lord Ram]," area Hindus dragged Bhagel out of the house as they slapped and kicked him. Police came to the site but remained mute spectators as the extremists continued beating Bhagel. Officers took Bhagel and other

Christians to the Civil Lines Police Station at 10:10 p.m., followed by nearly 70 Hindu extremists, and released them at 3:30 a.m. without being charged. Police officials told Compass that they could not arrest any of the Hindu aggressors because Bhagel stated that he could not identify any of them.

Karnataka – Police along with Hindu nationalist extremists on Nov. 6 disrupted a house church service in Bhadravathi, Shimoga district, falsely accused a physically challenged pastor of forcible conversion and verbally abused him. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that around 12:30 p.m. nearly 20 intolerant Hindus barged into the Faith in Christ house church as three families assembled for their weekly service. Pastor Kannan Ramesh, owner of a small tailoring shop out of the same house, told Compass that the extremists angrily questioned two Christians identified only as Thrimurthi and Kumar about “conversion activities” at the church. They also tried to coerce Kumar into falsely testifying that Pastor Ramesh was forcibly converting local villagers, which Kumar refused to do in spite of threats. The extremists took Pastor Ramesh by auto-rickshaw to Old Town Rural Police Station in Bhadravathi, along with Kumar and Thrimurthi. Police questioned Pastor Ramesh about his tailoring business and warned him against using the place as a church, and then released the Christians without charges at about 11 p.m.

Karnataka – Nearly 20 Hindu nationalist extremists from the Bajrang Dal on Nov. 3 attacked a Christian identified only as Manjunath on the pretext of “forcible conversions” near an apartment complex in Attavar, Mangalore. The Daijiworld Media Network reported that the extremists struck Manjunath, a construction worker, with their hands at the BG Court Apartments as he stood outside his rental unit. They entered Manjunath’s apartment and found Christian literature. Neighbors said they had no knowledge of any conversion activity at his apartment; local sources confirmed this to Compass, and police arrived at the same conclusion after an investigation. Occasionally Manjunath’s friends assembled for prayer at his house, sources said, and Hindu extremists noticed and mobilized a mob, bringing along local television crew that filmed the attack.

Chhattisgarh – Nearly 100 Hindu nationalist extremists on Nov. 1 stormed a Sunday service, attacking a pastor, his family and the congregation and spewing baseless accusations of forceful conversion in Fukagirola, 30 kilometers (19 miles) from Kondagaon, Bastar district. The Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) reported that at 11 a.m. the mob barged into Milan Prarthana Mandir church, accused Pastor Angel Natham of forcible conversion and started beating him. They snatched his 1-year-old son, Akush Raj, from his wife and threw him to the ground, then beat her and 10 others. EFI reported that Kondagaon police arrived at 1 p.m. and took the pastor to the police station, and only afterward was he sent to a hospital where he underwent treatment. His son’s left ear was reportedly injured, and the infant was having difficulty hearing. A police official told Compass a complaint of forcible conversion against the pastor was filed by a person identified only as Shuklal, and that an investigation into the assault was in progress.

Chhattisgarh – Suspected Hindu extremists attacked a Sunday worship service on Oct. 25 at Masturi, 17 kilometers (10 miles) from Bilaspur district, injuring the backbone, arms and chest of Pastor Pavitra Kumar Beshra. The 27-year-old pastor of Beersheba Church of God, who works with Indian Evangelical Team (IET), was attacked by masked men dressed in cricket uniforms at 1:30 p.m. They arrived on motorcycles and called Pastor Beshra out of the church, then started to beat him with a cricket bat and stumps, Anish Charan told Compass. The pastor managed to escape and shut himself into the church building. The attackers also injured another church member, Triveni Basanti, 34, according to IET, and damaged a church member’s motorcycle. The unidentified men left the place shouting “Jai Shri Ram [Hail Lord Ram].” Pastor Beshra has filed a First Information Report with local police.

Karnataka – Hindu extremists attacked a school for street children in Hubli district on Oct. 22. Some 25 members of the Sri Ram Sene (Army of Lord Ram) forcefully entered the school building of the Adarsha Children's Education Centre, which belongs to the minority Christian community, and damaged school property, Bibles and other books, reported the Global Council of Indian Christians. After vandalizing the school, the extremists went to a police station and pressed charges against school authorities for allegedly "forcefully converting" students to Christianity. This educational center, managed by Daniel Lingaraju, was started in July and is dedicated to training and teaching poor street children.

Convictions few for anti-Christian violence in Orissa

BJP legislator, a key suspect in Kandhamal violence, acquitted again and out on bail

By Shireen Bhatia

Compass Direct (11.11.2009) / HRWF (11.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Following six acquittals last week in trials for those accused of the 2008 anti-Christian violence in India's Orissa state and the release on bail of a key suspect, Christians are losing heart to strive for justice, according to a prosecuting attorney.

The acquittal of six suspects last week raises the total to 121, with just 27 convicted in the Orissa violence by Hindu extremists.

"The victims are so discouraged due to the increasing number of acquittals that they neither have hope nor motivation for the criminal revision of their cases in the higher court," attorney Bibhu Dutta Das of the Orissa High Court told Compass.

He said the acquittals are the result of defective investigations carried out by police.

"This has been done intentionally, to cover-up the fundamentalists," he said.

Das said that in many cases police fraudulently misrepresented the ages of culprits so that the ages of the accused in court would not match the age denoted in the victims' First Information Reports, leaving the court no option but to let the alleged culprits go.

"There can be two persons by the same name, so age is a major identification factor that is considered," said Das.

Christian leaders in Orissa said the state government's claims of justice for the victims of the anti-Christian violence ring hollow as the number of acquittals is far more than convictions.

An Orissa state Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) who was facing charges in 14 cases of "murder, burnings and assaults" in last year's Kandhamal district violence against Christians has been released on bail in one of the murder cases.

Manoj Pradhan, MLA from the Hindu extremist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in G. Udayagiri block, faces a murder charge in a slaying in Tiangia village. The Orissa High Court awarded him bail in the case, and he was released from Phulbani jail on Oct. 30.

On that day he was also acquitted of arson in a house-burning in Banjamaha village due to "lack of evidence." In trials relating to the Orissa violence of August-September 2008,

the Hindu extremist perpetrators have reportedly intimidated many witnesses to keep them from testifying.

"With Manoj Pradhan, who has charges of murder against him, released on bail, this is a big threat to the witnesses of cases against him," attorney Das told Compass.

If Pradhan remains free, Das said, he likely will be acquitted in all other cases as he will be able to threaten witnesses.

"Pradhan is already acquitted in six cases, whereas eight cases are still pending against him," Das said.

Special Public Prosecutor Bijay Pattnaik told reporters that Pradhan was acquitted of the arson charge as only one witness stepped forward.

"He was let off for want of evidence as there was a lone witness in the case," Pattnaik said. "Only the victim testified in the case, and the charges against Pradhan could not be proved."

Fast Track Court-I Judge Sobhan Kumar Das on Oct. 30 acquitted Pradhan of the house burning, which took place on Oct. 1, 2008. Earlier Pradhan was acquitted in two murder trials due to "lack of evidence."

In another case, witnesses had testified to the involvement of Pradhan in the kidnapping of Kantheswar Digal – subsequently murdered on Aug. 25, 2008 – in Sankarakhole village, Phulbani district, but their testimony failed to convince the court to condemn the BJP politician.

Pradhan was arrested and jailed in October 2008 and was elected as BJP MLA from the G. Udayagiri constituency while in jail.

Three Years of Prison

On Oct. 29 a fast track court at Phulbani sentenced three persons to three years rigorous imprisonment for destroying evidence in the murder of a man during the 2008 attacks in Kandhamal. Judge Das also imposed a fine of 1,000 rupees (US\$21) each on Senapati Pradhan, 65, Revenswar Pradhan and Tidinja Pradhan, both 62. Failure to pay the fine would result in an additional three months of prison.

The three men were charged along with seven others for killing tribal elder Sidheswar Pradhan in the village of Solesoru, Tikabali block, on Aug. 25, 2008.

Prosecutors said the three men clubbed Sidheswar Pradhan to death in front of villagers and family members, and that his body was set on fire. But the Judge Das convicted the three only of destruction of evidence in the case, exonerating them of the murder charges saying, "It could not be proved."

Padisti Nayak, a 65-year-old widow, was reportedly burned alive on the same day. She had stayed back and not fled even after hearing the news of violence against Christians, believing the attackers would not harm an elderly woman.

Twelve days later Iswar Digal, her son-in-law who had fled to a refugee camp, contacted a district magistrate for information about her. When authorities inspected the family's gutted home in Solesoru, they found only charred human remains, flesh and bones, which they collected as evidence of the violence.

The court acquitted the other seven of all charges due to lack of evidence against them.

Nabijini Pradhan, nephew of Sidheswar Pradhan, told Asia News that his family has since been receiving death threats.

"I cannot believe the murderers were acquitted," he reportedly said. "Our family is at risk; we are getting death threats; they want to eliminate us. They killed and burned my uncle's body to destroy every shred of evidence."

Human rights activist Dharendra Panda, a Hindu, told Asia News that some investigators are linked to Hindu extremists.

"Justice has been derailed, and some investigators are linked to the Sangh Parivar extremists," Panda reportedly said. "They are determined to protect the accused, willing to manipulate cases rather than ensure justice for victims. Now not only are the religious rights of the population undermined, but also the core values of humanity and democracy."

New, more dangerous Hindu extremist groups emerge in India

Christians concerned as rightwing factions splinter to form militant outfits

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (29.10.2009) / HRWF (05.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - After more than a decade of severe persecution, India's Christian minority is growing increasingly concerned over the mushrooming of newer and deadlier Hindu extremist groups.

Gone are the days when Christians had to watch out only for the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) and its youth wing, Bajrang Dal, which are closely linked with the most influential Hindu extremist umbrella organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). With voter support faltering for the RSS's political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), moderate and extremist sections within the Hindu nationalist movement are blaming each other, and militant splinter groups have emerged.

Claiming to be breakaway factions of the RSS, new groups with even more extreme ideology are surfacing. The Abhinav Bharat (Pride of India), the Rashtriya Jagran Manch (National Revival Forum), the Sri Ram Sene (Army of god Rama), the Hindu Dharam Sena (Army for Hindu Religion) and the Sanatan Sanstha (Eternal Organization) have launched numerous violent attacks on Christian and Muslim minorities.

The Sri Ram Sene was one of the most active groups that launched a series of attacks on Christians and their property in and around Mangalore city in the southern state of Karnataka in August-September 2008, according to a report, "The Ugly Face of Sangh Parivar," published by the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL), in March 2009. In Jabalpur city in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, suspected extremists from the Abhinav Bharat attacked the Rhema Gospel Church on Sept. 28, according to the Global Council of Indian Christians. They had earlier attacked Pastor Sam Oommen and his family in the same city on Aug. 3.

The Hindu Dharam Sena has become especially terrifying for Christians in Jabalpur. Between 2006 and 2008, Jabalpur was plagued by at least three anti-Christian attacks every month, according to The Caravan magazine. In the western state of Gujarat and

other parts of the country, the Rashtriya Jagran Manch has also violently attacked Christians, according to news website Counter Currents.

At an ecumenical meeting held in New Delhi on Saturday (Oct. 24), the secretary general of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, Archbishop Stanislaus Fernandes, said the rise of fundamentalism was "seriously worrying" the church in India. The meeting was held to discuss prospects for immediate enactment of federal legislation to counter religious extremism with the proposed Communal Violence (Prevention, Control and Rehabilitation of Victims) Bill of 2005.

RSS 'Too Mild'

The new groups, formed mostly by former members of RSS-connected outfits, find the Hindu nationalist conglomerate too "mild" to be able to create a nation with Hindu supremacy.

The Sri Ram Sene, mainly active in south India, was started by Pramod Muthalik after he was expelled in 2007 from the Bajrang Dal, one of the most radical groups in the RSS family, for being an extremist, according to the daily newspaper DNA. The Hindu Dharam Sena was started by Yogesh Agarwal, former worker of the Dharam Jagran Vibhag (Religion Revival Department) of the RSS, also in 2007, as he felt "the RSS did not believe in violence," according to The Caravan. He had earlier launched the Dharam Sena, an offshoot of the RSS, in Madhya Pradesh and neighboring Chhattisgarh state in 2006.

The founding members of the Abhinav Bharat, which was started in Pune in 2006, also believe that the RSS is not militant enough. Outlook magazine notes that its members were planning to kill top leaders of the RSS for their inability to implement Hindu extremist ideology. The Rashtriya Jagran Manch, also a breakaway group of the RSS founded in 2007, has close links with the Abhinav Bharat.

Based out of Goa, a western state with a substantial number of Christians, the Sanatan Sanstha provides the ideological base for Hindu militant groups. It has close links with the Sri Ram Sene and publishes a periodical, Sanatan Prabhat, which occasionally spews hate against Christians.

Media reports warn of tensions due to the recent spurt in activity of the splinter groups.

"The hardliners are now getting into more extreme activities," The Times of India daily quoted V.N. Deshmukh, former joint director of India's Intelligence Bureau, as saying on Oct. 21.

The most extremist sections are disillusioned with the way the RSS is functioning, said Mumbai-based Irfan Engineer, Director of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. Most RSS cadres were mobilized with an ideology that called for elimination of minorities, mainly Muslims and Christians, he told Compass, adding that many of them were highly disappointed with the way the movement was being led.

He said the BJP was restricted when it led a coalition government at the federal level from 1998 to 2004, keeping it from effectively working towards a Hindu nation. A majority of the BJP's allies in the National Democratic Alliance were not Hindu nationalists.

"One section of the [Hindu nationalist] movement believes in acquiring state power by participating in parliamentary democracy, and the other wants to create a Hindu nation by violent means," Engineer said.

It is believed that the divide within the RSS family may deepen even further.

Analysts believe that Hindu nationalism is losing relevance in national politics, as was evident in the two successive defeats of the BJP in the 2004 and 2009 general elections. Consequently, the RSS and the BJP may distance themselves from the hard-line ideology or make it sound more inclusive and less militant.

After this year's elections, the RSS increasingly has begun to talk about the threat China poses to India and the need for development in rural areas, instead of its pet issues like Islamist terrorism and Christian conversions. This has disappointed sections of the highly charged cadres even more, and the splintering may accelerate.

For the next few years, "we will see more new names and new faces but with the same ideology and inspiration," said Anwar Rajan, secretary of the PUCL in Pune.

Whether the new groups truly have no connection with the RSS is not fully known – that appearance may be an RSS strategy to evade legal action, said Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer, chairman of the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism in Mumbai.

He said relations between the RSS and the new groups can be compared with the ones between Maoist (extreme Marxist) rebels and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) in India. While the CPI-M distances itself from Maoist violence, it speaks for the rebels whenever security forces crack down on them.

At base, the newer rightwing groups surely have the sympathy of the RSS, said Pune-based S.M. Mushrif, former Inspector General of Police in Maharashtra, who has been observing Hindu extremist groups for years.

Massive 'reconversion' event in India aimed at Christians

Hard-line cleric leads campaign in Maharashtra, ideological capital of Hindu nationalism

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (27.10.2009) / HRWF (28.10.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Hundreds of tribal Christians and adherents of aboriginal religion from villages in Maharashtra state were reportedly "reconverted" to Hinduism yesterday in the Mumbai suburb of Thane at a ceremony led by a Hindu nationalist cleric.

Swami Narendra Maharaj's goal was to "reconvert" 6,000 Christians in the so-called purification ceremony, reported The Hindustan Times, which put the number of "reconversions" at around 800. Hindu nationalists believe all Indians are born Hindu and therefore regard acceptance of Hinduism by those practicing other religions as "reconversion."

Maharaj, a Hindu cleric known for opposing proclamation of Christ, has allegedly led anti-Christian attacks in tribal regions. On March 15, 2008, his men reportedly attacked two Catholic nuns, Sister Marceline and Sister Philomena, from the non-profit Jeevan Jyoti Kendra (Light of Life Center) in Sahanughati, near Mumbai.

The attack took place in a camp to educate tribal women on HIV/AIDS, which also provided information on government welfare programs, according to Indo-Asian News Service. The assault in Sahanughati, Alibaug district was followed by a mass "reconversion" ceremony in the area on April 27, 2008, said Ram Puniyani, a well-known civil rights activist in Mumbai.

Rightwing Hindu groups are mostly active in tribal areas. Hindu nationalists attack Christians in tribal areas because they provide social and development services, regarded as competition by rightwing Hindus seeking to woo tribal voters, said Anwar Rajan, secretary of the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL) in Maharashtra's Pune city.

Kandhamal district in the eastern state of Orissa, where a massive spate of anti-Christian attacks took place in August-September 2008, is also a tribal-majority area. At least 100 Christians were killed, 4,600 houses and churches were burned, and over 50,000 people were rendered homeless in the violence.

Sociologists maintain that India's tribal peoples are not Hindus but practice their own ethnic faiths. Hindu nationalists run Ekal Vidyalayas (one-teacher schools) in tribal regions to "Hinduize" local villagers and repel conversions to other faiths. These schools are operating in over 27,000 villages of India.

Dubious claims

An anonymous spokesman of Maharaj said the plan for yesterday's event was to "reconvert" 6,000 Christians to achieve the larger goal of "bringing back" 100,000 Christians, according to the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency.

The rightwing spokesman in Maharashtra, a western state where Hindu nationalism originated decades ago, claimed that Maharaj and his followers had overseen the conversion of more than 94,000 Christians "back to their original faith" and plan to complete the target of 100,000 in the next two years.

Maharaj, whose followers call him Jagat Guru (Guru of the World), told PTI that those who "reconverted" were not coerced.

"We are not having a religious conversion here – it's a process of purification," Maharaj was quoted as saying. "We taught them the precepts of the Hindu religion, and they decided to convert to Hinduism on their own after repentance. They were not forced."

Many reports of "reconversions," however, have been found to be false.

In 2007, Hindi-language daily Punjab Kesari reported that four Christian families in Nahan town, in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, had "reconverted" to Hinduism. But a fact-finding team of the All India Christian Council revealed that none of the members of those families had ever converted to Christianity.

The Hindustan Times reported yesterday's ceremony included rituals involving cow's milk, seeking forgiveness from ancestors, installation of idols of the Hindu gods Ganesh and Vishnu, and an offering ritual performed by priests from Ayodhya, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. Ayodhya is believed to be the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama.

Home of Hindu nationalism

The basic philosophy of Hindu nationalism was expounded by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, popularly known as Veer Savarkar, in 1923 through the publishing of a pamphlet, "Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?" Savarkar, who is from Maharashtra, argued that only those who have their ancestors from India as well as consider India as their holy land should have full citizenship rights.

A follower of Savarkar, Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, also from Maharashtra, further developed the Hindu nationalist philosophy through a book, "A Bunch of Thoughts," in 1966. He claimed superiority of Hinduism over other religions and cultures of the world.

"In this land, Hindus have been the owners, Parsis and Jews the guests, and Muslims and Christians the dacoits [bandits]," he said.

The emergence of Hindu nationalist ideology from Maharashtra came in reaction to the politics of social justice by Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar and Mahatma (Jyotirao) Phule, said Irfan Engineer, director of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies in Mumbai and an expert on religious conflicts. Phule led a mass movement of emancipation of lower castes, mainly Shudras and Ati-Shudras or Dalits, in the 1870s. Ambedkar, known as the architect of the Indian Constitution, began movements against "untouchability" in the 1920s.

Also born in Maharashtra was the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps, or RSS), India's most influential Hindu nationalist conglomerate. It was founded in 1925 in Nagpur by Dr. K.B. Hedgewar.

Hindu society has traditionally had four castes or social classes, namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. While Shudras belong to the lowest caste, Dalits were formerly known as "untouchables" because the priestly Brahmin class considered them to be outside the confines of the caste system.

During British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent between 1858 and 1947, sections of the Brahmins felt the British were sympathetic towards the Dalit reformist movement, said Engineer of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. Mahars, Maharashtra's largest Dalit people group, have been very organized and powerful since then.

The PUCL's Rajan said that the Brahmins have long portrayed minorities as enemies of Hinduism.

"Since the Dalit reformist movement is essentially against the Brahmin hegemony, the Brahmins had to react and get organized," Rajan said. "As a part of their strategy to weaken the reformist movement, Brahmins projected minorities as the 'real' enemies of all Hindus, including Dalits and other lower castes, diverting attention away from the atrocities they meted out on them."

Most of the founding leaders of Hindu nationalism, including Savarkar, Hedgewar and Golwalkar, were Brahmins. Since communal troubles benefited Hindu nationalists politically, the use of divisive issues became routine for them, Rajan added.

After two successive defeats of the Bharatiya Janata Party, political wing of the RSS, in general elections in 2004 and 2009, differences between the moderate and extremist sections within the Hindu nationalist movement – which blame each other for the party's downfall – have deepened to unprecedented levels.

In frustration, the extremists have accelerated their activities, especially in Maharashtra, the ideological capital, said Dr. Suresh Khairnar, a well-known civil activist from Nagpur.

Pastor in India lured into violent trap

Hindu extremists entice preacher into house, beat him unconscious

By Shireen Bhatia

Compass Direct (21.10.2009) / HRWF (22.10.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – A group of Hindu extremists in Madhya Pradesh earlier this month

beat a pastor unconscious and chewed off part of his ear, pelting him with stones after he fainted from the pain.

Paasu Ninama told Compass that the six attackers first lured him into a house in Malphalia village, Jhabua district with an offer of water on Oct. 4. The 35-year-old resident of Pipal Kutta village said he was on his way back from his regular Sunday service in Malphalia at 4 p.m. when six men sitting outside a house invited him in for a glass of water.

When he saw a photograph of Jesus Christ in the house, he knew they had set a trap for him – Pastor Ninama said he knew they would accuse him of providing the photo and trying to “forcibly” convert them.

“I immediately turned to escape when they all jumped on me and started to beat me, accusing me of luring people to convert,” he said.

They badly beat him with wood on his hands, legs and back.

“I joined my hands and begged them not to beat me and let me go, but they mercilessly continued to hit me black and blue,” Pastor Ninama said.

One of the Hindu extremists chewed off Pastor Ninama’s left ear, which bled heavily. Pastor Ninama fell unconscious.

“A piece of my ear was in his mouth, and it went missing,” said Pastor Ninama, in tears.

The attackers started pelting the unconscious pastor with stones until villagers intervened. There were two eyewitnesses who will testify in court of the attack, said Pastor Bahadur Baria, who lives in a nearby village.

When Pastor Ninama regained consciousness, he found himself in Life Line Hospital, Dahod, Gujrat state, 33 kilometers (20 miles) from the site of the attack. He sustained internal injuries and had severe pain in his chest from the beating and stoning, he told Compass.

Pastor Baria said the attackers planned to trap Pastor Ninama by saying he had given the photo of Jesus to them and that he had tried to convince them to forsake Hinduism for Christianity.

Pastor Baria told Compass that a group of Hindu fundamentalists later went to the Meghnagar police station on behalf of the attackers to file an FIR against Pastor Ninama, accusing him of entering their house with a photo of Jesus and trying to convert them to Christianity.” The officer refused to consider their complaint, he said, based on the obvious harm that the attackers had done to Pastor Ninama. Police also stated that they would not consider any complaint that could lead to violence in the name of religion.

Pastor Ninama has filed a First Information report (FIR) at the Meghnagar police station against Ramesh Ninama and his five accomplices. Police have filed a case for voluntarily causing hurt by dangerous weapons or means, punishment for voluntarily causing hurt and “obscene acts and songs” under the Indian Penal Code. Depending on the results of a medical report, they will decide whether to add the charge of voluntarily causing grievous hurt by dangerous weapons or means.

Sub-Inspector B.K. Arya told Compass that no arrests have been made yet. He confirmed that the charges could be modified depending on the expected medical report.

"I will personally see to it that the investigation is expedited and the culprits nabbed," Superintendent of Police Abhay Singh told Compass.

Fearless ministry

Pastor Ninama, who converted to Christianity five years ago, said that his faith and bold ministry have earned him many enemies.

"Twice the Hindu extremists tried to put me behind bars," but they had not treated him so severely, he said.

A year ago, he said, he was praying at a meeting in Malphalia village when two men approached him with a sword and made false accusations against him because of his ministry. One of them, Prakash Gadawa, had accused Pastor Ninama of forcefully converting his daughter, son and wife. They took Pastor Ninama to a police station, where they reached an agreement to drop charges, but six months ago Gadawa again attacked, this time entering the pastor's house with a sword and threatening to kill him.

"I went to file a complaint against him in the police station, but instead the police arrested me and kept me in custody for the whole day and took no action against Prakash Gadawa," he said.

Pastor Ninama revealed that around five days prior to the Oct. 4 incident, Gadawa came outside his house and shouted obscenities – accusing him of preaching the Bible and converting people.

"I did not take any action against this, for I know that no action will be taken by the police," the discouraged pastor said.

Pastor Ninama said he and his family became Christians after his wife was delivered from demonic possession by a pastor's prayer.

"After just three days, my wife was completely healed," he said. "Me and my family, we will serve the Lord."

For the past three years, Pastor Ninama has traveled a distance of 28 kilometers (17 miles) every Sunday to conduct four services in different churches in the area. More than 100 people gather to worship at Vadli Pada village, he said, 200 people meet in Pipalkutta village, 15 in Malbalia village and 13 families in Kodali village.

The independent pastor said he works as a day laborer in farm fields to sustain his family: 32-year-old wife Bundi Ninama, four daughters and two sons, the youngest boy being 5 years old.

Pastor Ninama told Compass that the Dahod hospital has referred him to Baroda's Nayak Hospital for further treatment and grafting of his ear.

"I will continue to do the work of the Lord," Pastor Ninama said.

Recent incidents of persecution

By Mahruaii Sailo and Shireen Bhatia

Compass Direct (29.09.2009) / HRWF (30.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Hindu extremists chased a pastor into hiding on Sept. 19 in

Lucknow. The All India Christian Council (AICC) reported that hardliners from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council or VHP), Bharatiya Janata Party and Bajrang Dal (youth wing of the VHP) accused Pastor Bechu Azah Chhedi of forceful conversions as they arrived in large number at his church in Ramdaspur village and disrupted the worship service. The same group has attacked the pastor three times, reported AICC, and local Christians who found out about the extremists' plan hid him. The pastor has relocated for safety.

Jammu and Kashmir – Police detained Pastor Salamat Masih and three others on false charges of forceful conversion on Sept. 17 in Hira Nagar. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that Hindu extremists from the Shiv Sena (Religious Army) beat the pastor and falsely accused him of offering 10,000 rupees (US\$207) to each of three converts from Hinduism about to be baptized. Police arrived and took the pastor and the three others to the police station, keeping them in custody for two days as a safety measure; local people incited by the extremists were eager to attack them, reported a source. No case was filed against the pastor after the intervention of local Christian leaders.

Andhra Pradesh – About 10 Hindu extremists on Sept. 13 attacked a worship meeting of Opier Ministries Evangelical Church in Warangal, beating a pastor. The All India Christian Council (AICC) reported that around 1 p.m., the intolerant Hindus barged into the worship service conducted by Pastor Pilly Kumar, verbally abused and beat him, and destroyed a sign board bearing the church's name. The pastor filed a police complaint, but officers refused to register a case. In May the extremists had warned the pastor not to conduct worship services in the area, reported the AICC.

Madhya Pradesh – Police arrested eight Christians from Blessing Youth Mission (BYM) under the state's anti-conversion law on Sept. 12 in Katni. A source reported that Christians, including women, were on their way to visit their children at a BYM hostel. They were waiting on the railway platform when, as a Christian worker scheduled to pick them up arrived, railway police arrived and accused them of forceful conversion, blasphemy against Hindu gods and creating havoc. The charges included "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of others with acts done by several persons in furtherance of common intention." The Christians were detained for about 20 hours and released on bail.

Karnataka – A group of unidentified men attacked St. Francis De Sales Church near Hebbagudi, Bangalore early on the morning of Sept. 10. The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported that the men were carrying weapons and broke into the building, damaging windows. The Press Trust of India reported that statues of Infant Jesus and Mother Mary on the premises were damaged. The group also tried to burn a van parked in front of the church building. Damages were estimated at about 200,000 rupees (US\$4,144), reported the GCIC. The church has filed a complaint and a First Information Report at Hebbagudi police station. Last year Karnataka, ruled by the Hindu extremist Bharatiya Janata Party, faced a series of attacks on churches in Mangalore, Bangalore, Davanagere, Kodagu and other towns.

Karnataka – Hindu extremists from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Shiv Sena (Religious Army) on Sept. 10 attacked a pastor identified only as Ramanjaniah, accused him of cheating people and of forceful conversion, then beat him and paraded him on the street in Tumkur. The Global Council of Indian Christian reported that the pastor was conducting a prayer meeting at a Christian's house when the intolerant Hindus stormed into the house and assaulted him. They tore a Bible and beat, punched and kicked the pastor and continued beating him as they dragged him about one kilometer. The pastor received hospital treatment for fractures in his face and leg. The extremists pressured police to restrain the pastor from future preaching, but officers only requested the pastor

inform them before he conducts worship. They promised police protection should he require it.

Madhya Pradesh – Police arrested a Christian worker for “preaching to forcefully convert people to Christianity” based on a complaint filed by the Hindu extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) on Sept. 8 in Barwani district. Sources reported that the RSS members dragged Gopi Krishnan of Friends Missionaries Prayer Band (FMPB) to the police station to file the complaint against him. The police booked him for joining in an assembly of more than five people after being commanded to disperse, and of abetment of the offense. Krishnan appeared before the sub-divisional magistrate the next day and was sent to Barwani district jail. He was granted bail on Sept. 10. FMPB representative Ravi Kumar told Compass that RSS members are pressuring Krishnan to leave his house before Sept. 30 or face harm. The Christian is scheduled to appear before a magistrate on Nov. 9. Local Christian leaders maintained that preaching to “forcefully convert” people does not take place in the area.

Rajasthan – About 30 Hindu extremists on Sept. 4 assaulted two Christian workers from Gospel for Asia and chased them into the jungle near Banswada. Sources reported that the extremists waylaid the two Christians as they were returning from a prayer meeting and viciously beat them and verbally abused them. The Christians fled and hid in the nearby forest. A Christian search team found the duo at midnight and gave them shelter. A Gospel for Asia representative said their names could not be disclosed for security reasons.

Orissa – Suspected Hindu extremists armed with country pistols and swords on Sept. 3 attacked Pastor Isaac Digal of Good Shepherd Community Church for holding a worship service in his house – beating him, his wife and daughter and ransacking his home in Kandhamal. The All India Christian Council reported that the extremists also took his mobile phone, bank book and ATM card. The Hindu extremists had reportedly made an earlier attempt to destroy his house and had threatened him several times. Police arrived at the scene, and the pastor filed a complaint. No arrests had been made at press time.

Andhra Pradesh – About 30 Hindu extremists attacked a pastor and a church on Aug. 30 in Mudinepalli. The All India Christian Council reported the Hindu extremists installed a microphone on the roof of the church building, and a Hindu idol in front it, as part of the Hindu Ganesh festival. Pastor Solomon Raju asked the extremists and a local official to move the mike to some other place, with the Hindu hardliners responding by disrupting the Sunday worship service and beating the pastor. He filed a police complaint. No arrests had been made at press time.

Karnataka top in attacks on Christians in India

Through August, more violence against Christians reported in state than in any other

By Mahruaii Sailo

Compass Direct (21.09.2009) / HRWF (21.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – With at least 43 incidents of anti-Christian violence, Karnataka saw more attacks on Christians in the first eight months of this year than any other state in India, according to advocacy organizations.

The figure compares with 35 attacks on churches, worship services and Christians during the same period last year in the state, which has become the center of violence against Christians. The states with the next highest incidents of anti-Christian violence from January through August this year were Andhra Pradesh with 14 and Madhya Pradesh with

11, according to figures from the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) and the All India Christian Council.

Former Chief Minister of Karnataka H.D. Kumaraswamy on Sept. 11 called on Gov. H.R. Bhardwaj to rein in abuses by the state's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government to ensure that law and order is maintained, reported the GCIC. In several districts of Karnataka during the first eight months of the year, local authorities allowed Hindu extremists to beat pastors, disrupt prayer meetings and worship services, and burn, vandalize, demolish or shut down prayer halls.

After August last year the number of violent incidents against Christians in Karnataka raced up, with a total of 112 attacks on Christians in 2008, and the Christian community fears a repeat of hostilities.

Kumaraswamy noted that a Sept. 10 attack on St. Francis De Sales Church at Hebbagudi, on the outskirts of Bangalore, came just days after Gov. Bhardwaj voiced concern over the security of minorities in the state. Armed attackers broke into the church, damaged statues and other items, smashed windows and destroyed a house behind the building, according to the Evangelical Fellowship of India. Church damages were estimated at 200,000 rupees (US\$4,173).

"It is unfortunate that the government did not take any action to curb communal menace even after your caution," Kumaraswamy wrote in a memorandum to the governor, adding that Gov. Bhardwaj was constitutionally bound to stop state security personnel from violating the law.

The former chief minister said he felt that the attack on the church, located close to the Hebbagudi police station on a busy road, reflected growing religious intolerance and tension in the state, and he criticized Home Minister V.S. Acharya for terming the attack a "minor incident."

Archbishop of Bangalore Bernard Moras told Compass that past experience leaves him little hope for future justice.

"The state government has promised to make an immediate inquiry into the recent church attack in Hebbagudi, but nothing has been done so far, and we have no results whatsoever from the Justice B.K. Somashekar Commission of Inquiry made into church attacks last year," he said. "Sad as it is, we feel that justice delayed is justice denied."

Former chief minister Kumaraswamy has demanded a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into attacks on prayer halls in the state. The leader of the opposition in the state Legislative Assembly, Siddaramaiah (who goes by a single name), has also demanded a CBI inquiry into all attacks on minorities and places of worship. The Hindu reported that he had asked state Chief Minister B.S. Yeddyurappa to stop blaming others for the mistakes of his government.

Siddaramaiah told media on Sept. 13 that members of the Hindu extremist Sangh Parivar were involved in the attacks on churches.

"The BJP government led by B.S. Yeddyurappa has failed to take action against those involved in these incidents that created unrest in society, and now the chief minister is blaming others for the mistakes committed by his government, which has resulted in a law-and-order problem in the state," he said.

The Hindu reported Siddaramaiah as saying that in an effort to cover up their mistakes, the chief minister and his cabinet dismissed the accusations as efforts to topple his government.

"If the chief minister has any proof to support his statements, let him hand over the issue to the CBI," Siddaramaiah added. "The truth will be out."

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also recently remarked that Karnataka has witnessed a number of incidents of communal violence this year.

"What is more worrisome is that the incidents were not limited to one or two districts," Singh said in comments that Chief Minister Yeddyurappa brushed off as untrue; the chief minister referred to the violence as a "few stray incidents" that were "blown out of proportion."

Tensions are high in the districts of Davangere, Mangalore, Bangalore, and also potentially volatile are the districts of Chickmagalur, Chitradurga, Belgaum, Tumkur, Udupi, Shimoga, Bagalkot, Dharwad and Kodagu, reported the GCIC.

Chief Minister Yeddyurappa reportedly has instructed police to provide security at all religious venues and directed them to take steps to take preventative measures. City Police Commissioner Shankar Bidari has reportedly said the chief minister ordered security officers to deal sternly with those involved in incidents of religious violence.

The Bangalore Rural police on Sept. 12 reportedly handed over the investigation of the attack on St. Francis De Sales to the Criminal Investigation Department.

Attempted anti-conversion law

Foremost among priorities of the Hindu nationalist BJP when it came to power in Karnataka last year was to introduce the kind of "anti-conversion" law that has provided the pretext for anti-Christian violence in other states.

Alarmed by what they said was an increase in conversions to Christianity, six prominent Hindu leaders on June 25 said that they had urged Chief Minister Yeddyurappa to introduce "anti-conversion" laws similar to those of Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, reported The Hindu. Passage of an anti-conversion bill has been left hanging, however, with negative publicity over communal violence and Christian protests against such a bill.

Such laws are designed to thwart forcible or fraudulent conversion, but they are popularly misunderstood as criminalizing conversion in general. The laws seek to curb religious conversions made by "force, fraud or allurement," but human rights groups say they obstruct conversion generally as Hindu nationalists invoke them to harass Christians with spurious arrests and incarcerations

Anti-conversion laws are in force in five states – Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat – and its implementation is awaited in the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Rajasthan. Several cases against Christians have been filed under various anti-conversion laws in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Orissa, but no one has been convicted in more than four decades since such laws were enacted.

Naveen Kumar of the Federation of Christian Churches and Organizations told Compass that Christians from different districts in Karnataka have come out in protest against such a bill since August of 2008. The Christians believe that the passing of an anti-conversion bill in the state would heighten atrocities against them.

Of the 52.8 million people in Karnataka, Christians number slightly more than 1 million.

Christians arrested for operating boys' hostel in India

Police accompanied by Hindu extremists charge pastor, evangelist with "promoting enmity."

By Binaifer Wadia

Compass Direct (02.09.2009) / HRWF (03.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Karnataka police accompanied by 10 Hindu extremists on Friday (Aug. 28) arrested a Christian operator of a boys' hostel after the extremists accused him and another Christian of offering food, shelter, education and future job prospects as an "allurement" to convert to Christianity.

Hanuma Naik is also pastor of Indian Gypsy Works Fellowship (IGWF). After his release on bail the next day, he dismissed the allegations as fabricated, saying that parents of the 42 students voluntarily sent their children, ages 6 to 19, to the hostel. The parents had prior information and knowledge that Christian teachings are part of the program at the church-run hostel, popularly known as a "Christian Ashram," he said.

Sub-Inspector Chemaiah Hiremath of Kunigal police station told Compass that Pastor Naik and another arrested staff member of the hostel, Rama Naik, had disclosed in voluntary written statements that another pastor, Madesh Kumar, was supplying them with books and other tracts. Asked about the "voluntary statement" he was said to have signed, Pastor Naik replied that both he and Rama Naik were forced to sign blank sheets of paper at the police station.

Hiremath told Compass that Ramesh Kariyappa, a resident of Kunigal, filed a complaint on Aug. 28 against Pastor Naik and Rama Naik of "forcible conversion" and using food and shelter as an allurement to convert. The sub-inspector went to IGWF, where 42 students mainly of the Lambani tribes are housed. He claimed the students were forced to pray to the biblical God, and that Hindus "have gods like Hanuman and goddess Lakshmi."

Hiremath said the Christians had promised the parents of the boys that they would take care of all the children's needs for food, clothing and education - a potentially criminal activity under draconian "anti-conversion" laws in force in some states, but not in Karnataka. Such laws seek to curb religious conversions made by "force, fraud or allurement," but human rights groups say they obstruct conversion generally as Hindu nationalists invoke them to harass Christians with spurious arrests and incarcerations.

The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported that Hiremath, Deputy Superintendent of Police Prabhakar Reddy and another official arrived at the IGWF church with 10 local Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) extremists led by Ramalingayya Gowda and two others identified only as Rangantha and Ramesh.

After falsely accusing the two Christians of fraudulently converting students to Christianity by luring them with food, shelter and education, the extremists slapped evangelist Rama Naik repeatedly and questioned many of the children about hostel activities, their studies and families, according to GCIC. Police put Pastor Naik and Rama Naik into a police jeep and confiscated Bibles and other Christian literature from the hostel.

With the Hindu extremists following behind them, the police then went to a nearby house church, Krupashraya Baptist Church (Grace of God Baptist Church) in search of Pastor Madesh Kumar, but he wasn't at home. His wife, Glory Kumar, told Compass that she was feeding her 18-month-old son when three policemen and six Hindu extremists arrived, entered the house and began questioning her about church activities.

"They went around the house and picked up Bibles and some prayer books," she said. Her son began crying, yet the police and extremists "in loud and threatening tones" sternly warned against future worship in the home and ordered her husband to report to the police station when he returned.

The GCIC reported that the police and extremists then went to the Indian Christian Revival Mission in search of Pastor Ranjanaswami Raju at K.R.S. Agrahar, Kunigal Taluk limits, but he was away, and his house, where his church meets, was locked.

Police took Pastor Naik and Rama Naik to the Kunigal police station at 11 p.m. and charged them under various sections of the Indian Penal Code, including "acts intended to outrage religious feelings by insulting its religion or religious beliefs" (Sections 295-A) and "promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion" (Section 153-A).

When Pastor Kumar showed up at the Kunigal police station along with attorney N.R. Rajashekar the next day, Aug. 29, at about 11 a.m., Hiremath asked him about his source of income and his house church. Pastor Kumar told Compass that he replied that he was an insurance agent and that only praise and worship services were held at his house. Hiremath warned him against "conversion activities" – mistakenly implying that conversion is illegal in India – and sent him home.

Rajashekar told Compass that the Christians were simple, innocent citizens who were being treated like criminals.

India's progress threatened by religious strife

Compass Direct (31.08.2009) / HRWF (14.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – While India recently celebrated 62 years of independence as the world's largest democracy, this month also marked the first anniversary of the anti-Christian violence in the state of Orissa.

India is home to people from a multitude of cultural and religious backgrounds, and its modern identity rests on a tradition of secular governance dating back to its independence.

Yet recurring problems with religious discrimination and eruptions of communal violence are creating some very unfortunate breaks in this narrative.

Because local governments have failed to respond adequately to such incidents, and the national government has failed to take effective measures to protect the rights of its citizens who belong to religious minorities, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has put India on its 2009 Watch List.

When Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited India last month, she and India's external affairs minister, S.M. Krishna, committed to building an enhanced India-U.S. strategic partnership that seeks to "advance solutions to the defining challenges of our time."

Both leaders committed to working toward a world without nuclear weapons, advancing common security interests, pursuing sustainable growth and economic development, and collaboration on energy security and climate change.

But, there appeared to be little or no bilateral discussion of human rights concerns in India.

Last year, Maoists murdered a Hindu religious leader known for his anti-Christian rhetoric, and it sparked a violent campaign targeting Christians in Orissa. The violence, which went on for several weeks, was carried out by supporters of Hindu nationalist groups and resulted in the destruction of hundreds of homes, dozens of churches, and at least 40 deaths. Not only did police forces fail to protect Christians, but there were also indications of awareness, and perhaps assistance, by state and local officials.

Although the Orissa government has ordered an investigation into the violence, only six people have been convicted, and Christians in Orissa continue to face intolerance and intimidation by Hindu nationalist groups.

More than 30,000 Christians are still living in poor conditions in refugee camps and are being threatened that, in order to return home, they must "reconvert" to Hinduism. The Indian government must do more to supply the displaced with basic supplies and provide security for a safe return.

While the state government took preventive measures in Orissa immediately after the attacks so that the 2008 Christmas holiday occurred without incident, the central Indian government could undoubtedly do more to prevent and also to redress religious-based violence in Orissa and elsewhere.

More disturbingly, such violence is not a new phenomenon in India; for all of the country's progress, communal violence remains a perennial problem.

The riots in Orissa were a painful reminder of the 2002 riots in the state of Gujarat, where over 2,000 Muslims were killed by Hindu mobs, hundreds of mosques and Muslim-owned businesses were looted or destroyed, and more than 100,000 people fled their homes. As alleged in Orissa, government investigations uncovered complicity by Gujarat state government officials and police inaction in the midst of these attacks.

Efforts to pursue the perpetrators of the Gujarat violence have made little progress. Seven years later, human rights groups report that many cases will likely remain unresolved or result in acquittals because of alleged lack of evidence or insufficient efforts on the part of local police.

For all of its economic gains, India continues to suffer from impediments to justice within the police, judiciary, and state government apparatus that have in a number of instances affected religious minorities.

In June, the Indian government refused to issue visas for USCIRF commissioners and staff to visit India to discuss religious freedom conditions with government officials, religious leaders and civil society activists.

Instead of avoiding discussion of religious freedom concerns, the Indian government should confront these incidents of communal violence. India's citizens and law enforcement personnel must find a greater appreciation for international human rights guarantees, including those directed at the protection of religious minorities. In particular, Indian officials should take proactive steps to prevent further violence and challenge cultures of impunity in areas with a history of communal tension.

If India wants to promote its rich history of religious pluralism and the peaceful coexistence of different linguistic, ethnic and religious groups, the Indian government must take strong measures to address the plight of Christians in Orissa, as well as Muslims waiting for justice in Gujarat. Only then can it truly take advantage of its religious diversity and move away from repetition of similar violence.

Imam Talal Eid and Don Argue are commissioners of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in Washington.

Recent incidents of persecution

By Mahruaii Sailo and Binaifer Wadia

Compass Direct (31.08.2009) / HRWF (01.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - West Bengal, August 31 (Compass Direct News) - Hindu hardliners have again attacked the Christian community in Bishnupur and threatened to kill them if they continue to practice their faith. About 15 Hindu extremists armed with knives and heavy rods of bamboo and iron shouted anti-Christian slogans as they attacked Khagen Majhi on Aug. 20. Threatening the Christian with violent "incidents like Orissa's Kandhamal situation," they commanded that he recant his Christian faith, reported the Evangelical Fellowship of India. Running from one Christian house to another, the enraged Hindu extremists also beat Manik Jana and verbally abused and manhandled Jharna Pradhan. Similar violence took place in the same area on July 29, as well as on Christmas Day of 2006. Area Christians filed a police complaint at Bishnupur police station, but no arrests had been made at press time. - MS

Andhra Pradesh - Suspected Hindu extremists set aflame a newly built church building in Mahasamudram, destroying it on Aug. 20. Best Friends Church was built with the permission of local authorities and was scheduled to be inaugurated on Aug. 30, reported the All Indian Christian Council. The next morning local Christians went to the site to find the church building in ashes. Pastor A. John filed a complaint at Bangarupalem police station. A police investigation is underway. - MS

West Bengal - Hindu extremists from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh on Aug. 20 attacked two Christians in Amtala, Kolkatta. The All India Christian Council reported that eight extremists accused two unidentified Christians of forceful conversion and filed a police complaint against them after forcing villagers to sign a letter of complaint. Christian leaders have taken the matter to authorities, and a police investigation is underway. - MS

Karnataka - Hindu extremists attacked the Mayer Memorial Church building and set fire to three vehicles belonging to Christians on Aug. 17 in Hubli. A Compass contact said the extremists were opposing a Christian rally organized by the church. Area Christians said they believe the attack was planned well in advance as the extremists arrived with media. The church cancelled the rally, and police provided protection to the Christian community. - MS

Karnataka - Members of the Hindu extremist Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or World Hindu Council) on Aug. 16 disrupted a Christian prayer meeting in Karwar, accused the pastor of forceful conversion and threatened him with violence if he continued Christian activities. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that at 7 p.m. a church leader of New Life Fellowship identified only as Pastor Quadros was conducting a prayer meeting in a church member's house when the extremists barged in. The intolerant Hindus accused the pastor of forceful conversion, searched the house and took Christian literature. The VHP filed a complaint against the pastor, and police ordered him to inform them about any future Christian activities. - MS

Kerala - Police on Aug. 12 arrested Christians based on false allegations of destroying Hindu holy books in Vythiri, Wayanad district. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that Hindu extremists of the local Hindu Ikkaya Vedhy group surrounded the house of Karthyani Amma, a Hindu in Laksham colony, near Vythiri police station, as her

son – a convert to Christianity identified only as Manikandan – was cleaning her home along with evangelist Sunny Joseph. The extremists created a disturbance, and Christians became embroiled in the subsequent uproar. Amma filed a complaint against the Christians for destroying Hindu holy books and articles used in rituals. The Christians were charged with promoting communal disharmony, house trespass, and damaging property. – BW

Karnataka – Hindu hardliners on Aug. 9 disrupted the worship of Indian Missionary Service and beat Pastor V. James in Gulbarga. The Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) reported that at around 10 a.m., about 20 Hindu extremists shouting anti-Christian slogans stormed into the worship service and accused the pastor of forceful conversion. They dragged the pastor out to the street, kicking, punching and beating him. The pastor fled to Ganigapura police station and filed a complaint against the extremists, reported EFI. Later in the evening, the intolerant Hindus went to the pastor's house and assaulted him again, chasing him, his wife and four children away from the village. The pastor has relocated to another area. No arrests had been made at press time. – MS

Karnataka – Hindu extremists on Aug. 9 ordered 20 Christians to leave their home village of Gulbarga because they had put their trust in Christ. The All Indian Christian Council (AICC) reported that village leaders in alliance with the Hindu extremists were reacting against a recent baptism service conducted by Pastor Sukruuth Raj. AICC reported Pastor Raj, who was instrumental in the baptized person coming to faith in Christ, as saying "all the believers are from the same village, and they are going to stay there." – MS

Maharashtra – About 45 Hindu extremists attacked two Gospel for Asia Christian workers, accused them of luring people to convert to Christianity and took their equipment on Aug. 8 in an undisclosed area in Maharashtra, according to a Christian source. Two Christian workers identified as Jayant Mehta and Dayanand Tambe were screening a film about Jesus that was attended by many villagers, reported the source. As the Christians were getting ready to go home, the Hindu extremists rushed at them and snatched their film equipment, then began beating them. They took the Christians to a police station and charged them with bribing people to convert to Christianity, giving fake names of people who would supposedly testify against them. After local Christian leaders intervened, the two Christian workers were released the next morning. The film equipment was returned to the Christians on Aug. 10 after police confirmed that the allegations were false. – MS

Kerala – Hindu extremists armed with swords on Aug. 7 barged into the prayer hall of the Full Gospel Church for God, attacked two Christians and vandalized the facility in Pullad. Hindu newspapers reported that about 25 extremists, two armed with swords, attacked Pastor Joe Kaithavana and a church member identified only as Deepu at around 10:30 p.m. and vandalized the prayer hall. The Christians sustained injuries and received hospital treatment. Koipram police have registered a case against the assailants. Member of Legislative Assembly K. Sivadasan Nair visited the site, condemned the attack and called for the immediate arrest of the extremists. – MS

Karnataka – On Aug. 7 in Haveri, a group of Hindu extremists from the Bajrang Dal accused a pastor from Every Home Crusade church of forceful conversion and threatened to beat him if he continued his ministry in the area. A church representative told Compass that about 25 extremists went to Pastor Ajit Kumar's house at around 11 a.m., spoke derogatorily about his faith, and warned him not to conduct a worship meeting on Aug. 10 or face serious consequences. The pastor registered a case against the extremists, and the Sunday church service took place on Aug. 10 under police protection. No arrests had been made at press time. – MS

Karnataka – Police arrested two Christians for distributing pamphlets and conducting a medical camp on Aug. 4 in Mosarukunte village, Tumkur district. The Evangelical

Fellowship of India reported that Pastor M. Shivanna, Vijay Kumar and some doctors were conducting a medical camp when the Hindu hardliners along with the village head objected to their activity, claiming that they had not obtained prior permission. The extremists later filed a police complaint, accusing the Christians of distributing gospel pamphlets to forcefully convert people to Christianity. Police arrested the two Christians under section 109 of the Criminal Procedure Code to ensure "good behavior from suspected persons," and later they were released on bail. – MS

Madhya Pradesh – Hindu extremists in Rewa, including a woman said to practice sorcery and witchcraft, burned down the home of a Christian on Aug. 2. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that when Raj Bahor accepted Christ and began attending the church of Pastor Heeralal Kushwaha, the Hindu woman in the neighborhood found the spells she cast on Bahor prior to his conversion had become ineffective. She and other Hindu extremists opposed to Bahor's new faith burned down his house, and local Christians filed a police complaint. An investigation is underway. – MS

Andhra Pradesh – Hindu extremists from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council or VHP) on Aug. 1 attacked Christians charging large-scale, forceful conversion; they forced the Christians to wear tilak, a Hindu symbol on the forehead, and threatened to kill them if they went ahead with church construction in Mahabubnagar. The All Indian Christian Council reported that Pastor B.Y. Dass of the Smarna Prayer Home Church had obtained land to build a church with permission from the village head. Upon hearing of the Christians' plan to build a church building, the VHP came to the site with the threats and accusations. At press time local Christian leaders were taking the matter to authorities. – MS

Orissa – The Rev. S.P. Lima of Cross International Ministries, operator of Agape Manor International Residential School, has been arrested and imprisoned since January 2008 in Baragarh and Sambalpur after Hindu extremists falsely accused him of raping a schoolgirl and feeding schoolchildren beef while claiming that it was mutton, according to his brother. Lima's brother, Dayanidhi Lima, told Compass that Hindu extremists filed a false complaint against his brother because Rev. Lima had refused to meet their demand that they give them 50,000 rupees (US\$1,035) to build a Hindu temple. A medical and DNA examination of the girl at Burla Medical College showed no evidence of rape. The girl had left the school on Jan. 5, 2008, and the First Information Report naming the pastor was filed on Jan. 12 of that year. Nevertheless he was arrested on Jan. 28, 2008. Area Christians maintained that the extremists pressured the parents of the girl to falsely accuse the pastor. The Additional District Session Court on June 12 of this year imposed a fine of 10,000 rupees (US\$207) and sentenced Rev. Lima to 10 years in prison; he was transferred to Sambalpur Prison, where he is subject to various kinds of punishment. – MS

Hindu extremists in India attack pastors, manhandle women

In violation of human rights standards, police arrest Christians for allegedly speaking ill of gods

By Binaifer Wadia

Compass Direct (14.08.2009) / HRWF (15.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Hindu nationalist extremists attacked Christians attending teacher training in Dharwad district, Karnataka on Wednesday (Aug. 12), but when one of the attendees escaped and went to police, officers arrested eight pastors on baseless claims of forcible conversion and – in a blow to free speech – for allegedly speaking ill of Hindu gods.

Pastor Moses Bentic, coordinator of the Seva Bharat Mission, told Compass that more than 80 Christians including nine pastors were attending the mission's teacher training, which began Wednesday and was supposed to continue through today. At around 11:30 pm on Tuesday (Aug. 11), 30 Hindu extremists from the Sri Ram Sena (Lord Ram's Army) entered the facility where the training was taking place, the Patil Sabha Bhavan, and began beating the pastors.

They repeatedly slapped and kicked the pastors, cursed Christianity using foul language and falsely accused them of forcible conversion. The Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) extremists also manhandled young women at the training, most of whom between the ages of 17 and 23, according to the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC).

Pastor Joseph Christopher, who managed to escape from the hall just after midnight, rushed to the Annigere police station to seek help. He told Compass that police were "indifferent" and refused to accept a complaint. Earlier, at about 11:45 p.m., Pastor Christopher had telephoned police but nobody showed up, he added.

"At around 1:30 a.m., two policemen arrived at the Patil Sabha Bhavan and were mute spectators as the extremists collected all the copies of the Bibles and burned them," Pastor Christopher said, adding that police also took mobile phones from the Christians.

Police officials who arrived at the hall around 4:30 a.m. shouted at the Christians, asked why no prior permission had been obtained for the meeting and took eight pastors to the Annigere police station, according to GCIC. Arrested were Vasant Kumar Hanoka, Simon Rathnappa, Basavaraj Rudappa, Madhan Kumar Yamanappa, Prakash Arjun Kagwadar, Jayraj Shiromani, Vijay Mayekar and Kumaraswamy Govindappa. They were charged with unlawful assembly, rioting, criminal conspiracy and "acts intended to outrage religious feelings by insulting religion or religious beliefs."

They were sent to judicial custody until Aug. 25.

Police, meantime, had locked the Christians at the teacher training inside the hall. Pastor Bentic said Francis Swaminathan Kaniya, pastor of an independent church, arrived at the hall at 8:30 a.m. for the meeting and was met by Hindu extremist Gangadhar Hallikeri, who repeatedly punched, slapped and verbally abused him outside the Patil Sabha Bhavan; others along with Hallikeri ransacked his satchel, seized his Bible, tore pages out of it and burned them.

"The police had locked up the hall with the other believers inside up to 12:30 pm," Pastor Bentic said. "After noting down the names and addresses of all the participants, the police escorted the believers in groups to the bus stand and made them leave the place."

Sub-Inspector Kuber Rajame told Compass that he and other officers went to the Patil Sabha Bhavan at 4 a.m. on Wednesday (Aug.12) based on a complaint by Hallikeri, who along with 15 others accused the Christians of forcible conversion and denigrating Hindu gods.

Sub-Inspector Rajame also said that he had sent police officers earlier, in the wee hours of the morning, to investigate the meeting and that they confirmed that the Christians were speaking derogatorily about Hindu gods. Denying that any of the Christians were beaten by Hallikeri and his group, the sub-inspector added that officers seized CDs, cassettes and books relating to Christianity from the place.

The private nature of the meeting notwithstanding, arrests for speaking ill of religions even in public constitute a violation of free speech as stipulated in the International

Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which India is a signatory, according to Christian leaders.

Sajan K. George, national president of the GCIC, told Compass that the organization has confirmed the attackers as Sri Ram Sena and Bajrang Dal leaders: Alikere, Palyad Kallur, Mahesh Palyad, Gangadhar Alikere, and Shivkumar Kallur.

"Last year Sri Ram Sena was involved in the attack of over 30 prayer halls in Mangalore city area, Karnataka, and they have the tacit approval of the local administrative machinery," George said. "That emboldens them to carry out attack on Christians."

GCIC has appealed to the Governor of Karnataka, the Home Minister of the government of India and the National Human Rights Commission to look into the matter."

Seva Bharath Mission India has been known for its humanitarian service to northern Karnataka for the past nine years. It provides adult literacy and children's education programs and has been involved in evening tuition classes for street children. The teacher's training program was organized to equip men and women from 11 districts in north Karnataka to teach and be a part of the humanitarian mission.

India hit over religious violence

BBC (13.08.2009) / HRWF (14.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A US congressional body has put India on a list of countries which have failed to protect its religious minorities adequately.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom says India was added to the list because of a "disturbing increase" in religious violence.

It mentioned the anti-Christian and anti-Muslim riots in Orissa and Gujarat in 2008 and 2002 respectively.

India has not yet commented on its inclusion on the "watch list".

Other countries on the list include Afghanistan, Somalia and Cuba.

Leonard Leo, the chair of USCIRF, said that it was "extremely disappointing" that India has done "so little to protect and bring justice to its religious minorities under siege."

"India's democratic institutions charged with upholding the rule of law, most notably state and central judiciaries and police, have emerged as unwilling or unable to seek redress for victims of the violence," he said.

"More must be done to ensure future violence does not occur and that perpetrators are held accountable."

Last year, Kandhamal district in Orissa witnessed weeks of anti-Christian violence after a Hindu leader was shot dead.

The clashes erupted after Hindu groups blamed Christians for the killing.

And more than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, died in the riots in Gujarat which began after 60 Hindus died in a fire on a train in 2002.

The USCIRF says that the Obama administration should urge the Indian government to take measures to promote communal peace and protect religious minorities.

The panel issues an annual report on religious freedom every May.

But its India chapter was delayed after the Indian government declined to issue visas for the trip, the USCIRF said.

Christians dispute police theory on priest's death in India

Hindu extremists suspected in area known for anti-Christian violence

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (03.08.2009) / HRWF (04.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The suspicious death of a 39-year-old priest in the southern state of Karnataka has further terrified Christians living in an area known for anti-Christian violence, but police indicate that they doubt it is a homicide.

The body of the parish priest of St. Mary's Church, the Rev. James Mukalel was found lying near his motorbike on a remote roadside in Belthangady sub-district near Mangalore early last Thursday (July 30). After family members reportedly sought a second autopsy that delayed interment, the priest's body was buried on Saturday (July 25) with the cause of death still unsolved.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) maintains that Mukalel, from Belthangady's Syro-Malabar diocese in Karnataka's Dakshina Kannada district, was killed.

"According to Fr. Joseph Valiaparambil, vicar general and spokesperson of the diocese of Belthangady, the death of the priest appears to be suspicious and unnatural," officials at CBCI said in a statement, "as his body was found lying on the roadside near the motorbike which he was riding, and there were no clothes on his body."

Alluding to Hindu nationalist extremists, the CBCI affirmed that "such killers represent no religious community but only a section which promotes the cult of violence, whose inhuman acts only further widen the gap between religious communities, thus aggravating the agony of the even larger human family."

The Catholic Church demanded that the alleged killers be brought to justice, but police said Mukalel may have died from food poisoning. Superintendent of Police of Dakshina Kannada district Subramayeshwar Rao told Compass that police had only two theories on the cause of death.

"Although I have not seen the autopsy report, I learned from the forensic surgeons that Fr. James Mukalel died of poisoning - most likely naturally because of food poisoning, or he was poisoned."

There were no external marks of injury or signs of suffocation, Rao added. The diocesan social work director had reportedly said there were signs of suffocation on the body.

Asked why Mukalel's body was found nearly naked, Rao said only that Mukalel had vomited and passed a stool before his death.

"The body was found without any clothes, with only underwear, which had been pulled down the legs," Rao said. "I don't know why some people are thinking like that [that he was killed and for religious reasons]."

The Karnataka-based Global Council of Indian Christians has demanded an inquiry by the federal Central Bureau of Investigation.

Two Autopsies

Mukalel, from Kannur district in the neighboring state of Kerala, was recently assigned to St. Mary's Church.

According to the CBCI, Mukalel was killed as he returned to his parish in the Kutrupady area after attending the funeral of a parish priest in the adjacent Charmadi village around 9 p.m. on Wednesday (July 29).

On Friday (July 31) the priest's body was taken to Government Wenlock Hospital in Mangalore, district headquarters of Dakshina Kannada district, after which the Catholic Church sent the body for last rites to St. Sebastian's Church in Vellad, in Kerala state's Kannur district.

A funeral service was held at St. Sebastian's Church on Saturday (Aug. 1), but the body was not buried. It was instead taken to the Government Medical College at Kozhikode in Kerala for another autopsy because Mukalel's parents and brother, along with other close relatives, felt it was not a natural death, Indo-Asian News Service reported.

Police official Rao said he had not been apprised of a second autopsy. "I heard about it in the news," he said. "There is no legal provision for a second autopsy."

Reports of the two autopsies were awaited at press time. The case, registered as a suspicious unnatural death under Section 174 C of Criminal Procedure Code, will be processed only after autopsy reports are completed.

Past Attacks

The minority Muslim and Christian communities have faced numerous attacks in Dakshina Kannada district in general and in Mangalore in particular.

Most recently, The Hindu reported that on the evening of May 16, the day general election results were announced, a group of people celebrating the victory of Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate Nalin Kumar Kateel from Dakshina Kannada attacked four Muslim families with sticks, soda bottles, cricket bats and cycle chains in the Nettrakere area in the Bantwal area in Mangalore.

In August-September of last year, at least 28 attacks on churches were reported in Dakshina Kannada district, mainly in Mangalore. According to a report by the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL), in every case, the attackers were from Hindu nationalist extremist groups like the Bajrang Dal, the Hindu Jagaran Vedike or the Sri Rama Sene.

The attacks were seen as fallout from violence in Kandhamal district in the eastern state of Orissa, where Maoists on Aug. 23 killed a leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council or the VHP, whose youth wing is the Bajrang Dal), Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, for which Christians were wrongly blamed.

In Karnataka, Hindu nationalists also based their violence on alleged conversions of Hindus to Christianity and to protest a booklet, which they said was "derogatory" to Hindu gods, published by a Christian group, New Life Fellowship Trust.

Mangalore police were also suspected of having played a role in the attacks.

"What was striking about these attacks, especially in Mangalore, is that the police acted in tandem with the Bajrang Dal," said the PUCL report, entitled, "From Kandhamal to Karavali: The Ugly Face of Sangh Parivar" released in March.

"The pattern we observed was that the Bajrang Dal would attack Christian places and cause injury to persons and damage to property," according to the report. "Then the police would step in, not to chase and arrest the assailants, but ostensibly to prevent any violent retaliation by the Christians. And in the course of the alleged preventive activity, they would assault the Christians further."

A report by the National Minorities Commission also said that in the first week of the attacks on churches, police arrested more Christians, 47, than extremists from the Bajrang Dal, 36.

Karnataka is ruled by the BJP, which came to power for the first time in the state in alliance with a regional party, the Janata Dal Secular, in February 2006. In May 2008, it won the state assembly elections and became the one-party ruler of the state.

Recent incidents of persecution

By Mahruaii Sailo and Binaifer Wadia

Compass Direct (30.07.2009) / HRWF (31.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - As if conversion were illegal in India, nearly 50 Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or World Hindu Council) and Bajrang Dal activists on Sunday (July 26) stormed the compound of the Assembly of God Bethel Church in Habibganj, Bhopal, accusing Christians of converting people. The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported that pastor K.A. George and a guest pastor were about to baptize a woman and her daughter when the extremists entered the church premises shouting "Jai Shri Ram [Victory to Lord Ram]." The Indian Express reported that Superintendent of Police R.S. Mishra stated that Hindu extremists Devendra Rawat, Kamlesh Thakur and others charged that conversions were taking place; church secretary Abraham George filed a counter-complaint that the VHP and Bajrang Dal disrupted the Sunday service. The VHP and Bajrang Dal extremists also accused the church of "allurement" in the conversion of the woman's daughter, but a GCIC regional coordinator told Compass that the woman and her daughter have been worshipping there for many years and stated that they desired to receive baptism of their own free will. At press time, police were investigating the complaints of both the parties.

Madhya Pradesh - On Sunday (July 26) about 40 Hindu extremists from the Dharam Sena (Hindu Religious Army) attacked the Sneh Sadan (Home of Love) Institute run by Christians in Japalpur. A source reported that at about 12:30 a.m. the Hindu extremists shouting anti-Christian slogans tried to enter the institute for the handicapped run by the Methodist Church. Prior to the attack, the extremists filed a police complaint against the home manager, Lily Paul, for alleged forceful conversion. The police reached the premises before the extremists did major harm. Police took written statements about the institute from Paul and promised to carry out an inquiry. "Sneh Sadan is the abode of about 40 special people, and the incident has left us shaken," Paul said. Police provided protection for the home.

Karnataka - Hindu extremists on Sunday (July 26) attacked a prayer meeting of St. Thomas Evangelical Church in Hassan, beat the pastor and destroyed church furniture. The extremists filed a complaint against pastor Basanth Kumar of forceful conversion and handed the church's Bibles and hymnbooks to police, reported the Global Council of

Indian Christians. Officers registered a case of forceful conversion against the pastor and released him on the condition that he would present himself whenever summoned. The next day at about 6 p.m., the police summoned the pastor and arrested him for "abetment of a thing." He was released on bail on Tuesday (July 28) with the help of local Christian leaders.

Andhra Pradesh – Hindu medical students at Gandhi Medical College under the influence of Hindu extremists from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or World Hindu council) on July 23 beat a professor and filed a complaint with the college principal accusing three faculty members of forceful conversion in Musheerabad. A source reported that the extremists had the Hindu medical students submit a letter to the principal charging that Prof. Anthony David, Dr. Sudhakar and Dr. Uday Kumar were forcibly converting people to Christianity. The principal called for a meeting, and about 100 Hindu extremists gathered at the college. The principal informed the extremists that the college would form a committee to investigate, and the panel reported that no religious conversions took place on the college premises. The extremists crowded around Sudhakar and Kumar, angrily questioning them, and after they left two unidentified extremists followed the third professor, David, to his room and beat him. The professor sustained minor injuries. Tension prevails on the college campus, a source said. – MS

Tamil Nadu – Hindu extremists on July 22 assaulted a Christian media team and accused them of forceful conversion in Erode. The All India Christian Council reported that the intolerant Hindus attacked 10 members of the Young Men's Evangelical Fellowship, South Division, while they were distributing gospel tracts. They seized and burned all literature, damaged their vehicle, kicked and beat the Christians and took them to a Hindu temple, where they were forced to lie down and pay homage to idols. An unidentified local Christian alerted the police, who came to the site and freed the Christians. One of the team members received hospital treatment, and the rest were provided first aid. – MS

Karnataka – The Karnataka High Court on July 20 continued a stay order against demolition of the Indian Apostle Church (IAC) building in Channagiri, Davangere district, according to The Hindu. Area Christians had challenged the demolition order and charged that the district administration had taken several anti-Christian measures, including ordering the church demolition. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that previously police had disrupted the church's Sunday worship service and closed the IAC, claiming that it had opened with an illegal license; officers issued arrest warrants against two pastors and seven Christians in Ajihalli village, Davanagere. Earlier, on May 29, the village head along with Hindu extremists had disrupted a prayer meeting led by pastor Prem Prasanth as the church building was being dedicated. The pastor told them he had obtained permission from the village head, but the chief denied issuing a license to the Christians. On June 25, the village head sent a notice to Pastor Prasanth cancelling the license for the church building. On July 7, police disrupted the worship service and closed the church. Later, when Pastor Prasanth and other Christians went to Channagiri police station to inform officials that they had obtained the license from the village head, officers filed false charges against them for rioting and voluntarily causing hurt. – BW

Haryana – Hindu extremists from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on July 19 attacked a children's educational center in Ambala, beating Christian staff members and ordering everyone to vacate the premises. A source reported that BJP Hindu extremists attacked pastor Daniel Kamaraj and his staff, who are running a free educational program under Children Compassion Ministry. The five Christian staff members sustained minor injuries. The intolerant Hindus accused pastor Kamaraj of forceful conversion and forced him to leave. The pastor went to the police station the next day, where officers told him to vacate the building as soon as possible. At press time the learning center had been relocated to the pastor's home. – MS

Andhra Pradesh – Police arrested a Christian woman identified only as Hemavathy on charges of “proselytization” on July 19 in Tirupati. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that the arrests were made on the basis of the complaint filed by a medical officer from Shri Venkateswara Ayurvedic College-Hospital, who accused her of distributing religious pamphlets on hospital premises. Area leaders from the Hindu extremist Bharatiya Janata Party staged a protest in front of the police station demanding action be taken against Hemavathy. The Hindu reported that Circle Inspector V. Subhanna said action would be taken in accordance with Government Order No.747, which prohibits “proselytization in and around Hindu temples and institutions.” The Christian woman was released on bail on July 21 at 6 p.m. – MS

Karnataka – A mob of about 20 Hindu hardliners on July 19 attacked a prayer meeting and accused Christians of forceful conversion in Pillingiri, Shimoga. At about 7 p.m. a pastor identified only as Chinnadurai was leading a prayer meeting at the home of a member of his Pentecostal Mission church when the intolerant Hindus stormed in and threatened and assaulted the Christians, reported the Evangelical Fellowship of India. The Hindu extremists filed a police complaint of forceful conversion and pressured officers to arrest the Christians. Police arrested the Christians for “deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class” and unlawful assembly. The Christians were released the next day. – MS

Andhra Pradesh – Police on July 19 arrested Pastor Devadass of Manna Church after Hindu extremists from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh beat him and accused him of distributing gospel tracts on Hindu temple premises. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that about 10 extremists assaulted the pastor as he was returning from a Sunday worship meeting. They dragged him to a police station and accused him of distributing gospel tracts at the Rajarajeshwar Hindu temple in Vemulawada. Officers detained him for a couple of hours, releasing him on the condition that he return to the station the next day, when they took a written statement from him. On July 24 police arrested the pastor in his home for “deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class.” The pastor remained in Karimnagar district jail at press time. – MS

Manipur – Village leaders in Huikap this month tried to decree that no corpses of Christians will be allowed to be buried in the village. The All Indian Christian Council reported that the unconstitutional order came after a 2-year-old boy from a Christian family drowned in a village pond on July 19; the body of the boy was buried in a church plot, but the next day anti-Christian villagers forced the father of the child and the pastor of a church to disinter it. Village authorities later agreed to let the boy’s body remain at the graveyard on the condition that the corpses of minor children be buried according to Hindu custom. This order was also unconstitutional, and Northeast Support Centre and Helpline spokesman Madhu Chandra told Compass that area police officials had issued an order to the Hindu village leaders to refrain from enforcing it. At press time calm had returned to the area. – MS

Karnataka – Police on July 18 arrested four Christian workers in Bangalore after Hindu extremists dragged them out of a house, beat them mercilessly and charged them with forceful conversion in Bangalore. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that Hindu extremists attacked Madan Kumar, Amar Singh, Munendra Kollar and James Wesley while they were praying in a Christian’s home. The Christians were reported to have previously distributed gospel tracts and pamphlets. At 8:30 p.m. the Christians were taken to Gnanabharathi police station and arrested for “deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class” and actions contrary to national integration. They were released on bail the next day. –MS

Karnataka – Hindu extremists beat a pastor and accused him and his wife of forceful conversion on July 10 in Chitradurga. The Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) reported

that at about 10 a.m. the Hindu extremists, led by H.R. Kallesh, stormed the tea stall of a woman identified only as Sharada, wife of a pastor identified only as Nagaraj, and questioned her about her faith. The extremists verbally abused her, threatened to burn her alive and asked her how much money her family had received to convert to Christianity. They took her to a police station to file charges against her, also accusing her and her husband of forceful conversion. On hearing about the incident, the pastor rushed to the police station, where the extremists repeatedly struck him upon his arrival while officers stood by watching, according to EFI. The pastor also filed a complaint against the attackers. No arrests had been made at press time. – MS

Karnataka – Police issued arrest warrants against pastor Godwin Nicholas and Charles Ravi Kumar on the basis of a complaint filed by Hindu extremists against them of forceful conversion and bribery in Hassan. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that the Hindu extremist Sangh Parivar filed a police complaint on July 10 in Arsikere police station falsely accusing Pastor Nicholas and Ravi Kumar of forceful conversion and offering people money to convert to Christianity. A First Information Report was registered against the Christians and arrest warrants were issued, but they were granted bail on July 13. – MS

Gujarat – Suspected Hindu extremists on July 6 attacked a Christian school in Dahod. The Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) reported that authorities of St. Stephen High School requested some female students with henna designs on their arms to wash them off in accordance with school rules. The parents of one unidentified student reported the matter to the Hindu extremists. The following day, the extremists barged into the school and asked authorities why the girls were asked to wash off the henna designs. Unable to listen in their fury, they started beating the principal and desecrated Christian statues at the school. EFI reported that the school remained closed the following day as a sign of protest against the incident, and area Christians wore black badges. The school filed a police complaint, but no arrests had been made at press time. – MS

Andhra Pradesh – Hindu extremists from the Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad (All India Student's Council), formed under the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, on July 1 attacked St. Agnes School in Mahaboobnagar. Reacting to the punishment for disturbing class of a Hindu student identified only as Keerthi, the Hindu extremists along with the student's brother attacked the Christian school shouting, "Jai shri Ram [Praise Lord Ram]." They destroyed furniture and other fixtures and threatened to harm school authorities. Both parties filed a police complaint. No arrests had been made at press time. – MS

Chhattisgarh – Hindu extremists from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or World Hindu Council) and Bajrang Dal (Youth Wing of the VHP) put up three signboards in Bastar in July sternly warning Christians not to preach in the area. The signboards, placed at three different sites, read, "Preaching about Jesus Christ is strictly prohibited in the area." The signs include pictures of Hindu deities along with names of the extremists groups. Most of the churches in Bastar, which borders the troubled district of Kandhamal, Orissa state, were closed down as the Hindu extremists continually threatened tribal Christians there. – MS

Recent incidents of persecution

By Mahruaii Sailo and Binaifer Wadia

Compass Direct (10.07.2009) / HRWF (13.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – About 50 Hindu extremists from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Bajrang Dal (Youth Wing of the World Hindu Council) chanting, " Jai Shri Ram [Praise lord Ram]" barged into Beersheba Church and attacked pastor Kuldeep Daniel, his

family and church on June 14 in Ratlam. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that the extremists beat, punched and kicked the pastor, his wife, two children and brother and also verbally abused them. They also destroyed church musical instruments and took the pastor's books and his brother cell phone. The couple suffered minor injuries. The pastor filed a police complaint at Alkapuri police station, but no arrests had been made at press time.

Karnataka – Police on June 12 detained Christians on a false complaint of conversion by allurements at Renuka Lodge, Athishaya Colony, Krishnaraja Sagar. The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported that a Church of Christ house church pastor, K. Nagaraj, had organized a fasting and prayer service on June 9-12 in which many pastors and other Christians had gathered. At 11 a.m. a Hindu extremist from the area identified only as Vaiaramudi led a mob of around 20 people into the lodge, making baseless allegations of bribing people to convert to Christianity. The extremists beat the Christians and took them to the police station, where they registered the complaint. Police allowed the injured Christians to obtain medical treatment but detained Pastor Nagaraj and his wife, Anusuya. With the intervention of GCIC, the couple was released at 11:45 p.m. without charges.

Andhra Pradesh – Police on June 7 arrested pastor David Raju on a baseless complaint of forceful conversion from Hindu extremists in Hyderabad. According to the Evangelical Fellowship of India, Pastor Raju was invited by local Christians in Mangalagiri to preach in their church. Upon his arrival, about 20 extremists gathered and began beating the pastor, accusing him of forceful conversion and distributing gospel tracts. The Hindu hardliners later dragged the pastor to a local police station, where he was detained for about eight hours. With help from local Christian leaders, the accused reached an agreement with the Hindu extremists in which the pastor was given permission to continue Christian meetings in the area and the Christians forgave the extremists.

Karnataka – Police on June 7 disrupted a Sunday worship service and closed an Apostolic Church in Davanagere, claiming that the church had an illegal license. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that the village head and Hindu extremists had interrupted a prayer meeting conducted by pastor Prem Prasanth on May 29 and questioned him about permits for constructing a church building there. The pastor told them that he obtained the necessary permission from the village head, to which the official denied giving Christians any such permission, saying they were engaged in forcible conversion efforts. On May 31, the pastor received a notice cancelling the church license. Police subsequently disrupted the following Sunday worship meeting, ordering Christians to leave and locking up the church. The pastor appealed to police, who told him to take the matter up in the court. The church remained shut down at press time.

Assam – Hindu extremists from the Vishwas Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) on May 31 vandalized a Baptist church in Jorhat and threatened two Christian girls, 16-year-old Moromi Gogoi and Monica Gogoi, 18, daughters of a pastor who was arrested on May 8 by Assam police on false charges of forcible conversion. The Hindu hardliners also demanded 5,000 rupees (US\$100) from the girls. A source reported that about 10 intolerant Hindus entered the church premises and broke the church's fence, walls, windows and doors, and they had threatened the two girls several times via mobile phone to stop their ministry or face dire consequences. Assam Valley Baptist Mission (AVBM) leaders took the matter to officials, refusing to meet the demands. An AVBM representative told Compass that calm had returned to the area as news spread that police were following up the matter.

Andhra Pradesh – Police detained Christians after Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) extremists falsely accused them of forcible conversion. The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported that pastor S. David of Yesu Prarthana Mandiram (Jesus Christ Prayer House), in Shad Nagar, Mahaboob Nagar district, organized a Vacation Bible School on

May 25-31 for nearly 75 children in Kammadanam village, Mahaboob Nagar district. On May 28, as two Christians identified only Narasimhalu and Ramesh were conducting classes, local extremists from the Hindu extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Vishwa Hindu Parishad arrived and accused the Christians of forcibly converting village children. The extremists filed a complaint at Shad Nagar police station against Pastor David, Narasimhalu and Ramesh. Jey Prakash, GCIC regional coordinator, told Compass that police held the Christians until evening and released them without charges, but the Vacation Bible School was stopped immediately.

Madhya Pradesh – About 10 Hindu extremists from the Hindu extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh attacked pastor Ramesh Mandevey, leaving him unconscious on May 24 in Dewas. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that about 10 Hindu hardliners stopped the pastor as he was on his way back from visiting a Christian's home and assaulted him. Sustaining internal injuries, the pastor was hospitalized in a local hospital. Local Christian leaders filed a police complaint at Dewas police station, but no arrests have been made.

Assam – Police on May 8 arrested and beat pastor Tarun Gogoi for alleged forceful conversion, suspicion of having links with Naga rebel militants and receiving donations from them for construction of their church building in Jorhat, Guwahati. The Hindustan Times reported that the pastor was accused of carrying out religious conversions – which are legal in India – with the help of tribal Naga underground groups, and the administration ordered him to temporarily stop construction work on their church building. Hindu extremists had filed a complaint against the pastor of luring local people to Christianity by offering cash and gifts-in-kind. Area church leaders denied any involvement with underground groups and forceful conversions, and they demanded legal action from authorities against officers who mistreated Pastor Gogoi. The pastor was released on May 9 after church intervention. Temsu Wathi, president of Assam Valley Baptist Mission, told Compass that after an inquiry, local officials said there was no evidence of forceful conversion and allowed the Christians to resume the church construction.

Tamil Nadu – Hindu extremists in Krishnagiri attacked pastor Paul Chinnaswamy on May 6, seriously injuring him. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that the intolerant Hindus assaulted Pastor Chinnaswamy near his church. Kicking and punching him, they struck his chest and jaw and broke two of his teeth. Local Christians rushed to the scene and took him to a nearby hospital. The pastor filed a police complaint at Uddinapally, and officers took the pastor to three areas to identify the attackers, but he was unable to identify anyone. No arrests had been made at press time.

Hundreds of Muslims attack about a hundred Christian homes in Punjab

by Qaiser Felix

Asianews (02.07.2009) / HRWF (07.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – A mob of some 600 people attacked about a hundred Christian homes in Bahmani, a village in Kasur district in Punjab. The National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP) of the Catholic Church in Pakistan reported the incident, saying that the violence caused major damages to a number of homes. The attackers also stole valuables (gold jewellery and cash).

The incident occurred on Tuesday. A cleric in a local mosque accused the Christians of blasphemy inciting his fellow Muslims to attack the Christians. However, according to the NCJP the real reason for the attack lies elsewhere, in events that occurred a day earlier.

Speaking to AsiaNews NCJP member Irfan Barkat said the trouble began on Monday when two men, one Christian, the other Muslim, quarrelled. The Muslim, Muhammad Riaz, was riding his bicycle and found himself on the path of Sardar Mashī, a 38-year-old Christian who was driving his tractor. When Mashī asked Riaz to move to let him pass, the latter refused and this turned into a quarrel between the two men. Later the Muslim turned to his local Muslim religious leader, saying the Christian had blasphemed.

The following night Muslims stormed the Christian section of the village, targeting about a hundred houses, setting some on fire with petrol bombs. A mob of about 600 Muslims attacked Christians with sticks and acid, torching cars and motorcycles parked in the streets as well as electricity meters.

Yesterday, a committee made up of six Christians and Muslims met to deal with the issue and find a way to pacify relations between the two communities. They set themselves a four-day deadline for a solution, Irfan Barkat said.

Incidents like the one in Bahmani are frequent in Punjab province. Usually violence by Muslims is justified by blaming would-be victims of blasphemy.

According to the NCJP, a total of 892 people have been charged with blasphemy since 1986.

Under Section 295 B of Pakistan's Criminal Code, insulting Muhammad or Islam, or desecrating the Qur'an, is punishable by life in prison or death.

Orissa: first conviction in anti-Christian riots case

by Nirmala Carvalho

Asianews (01.07.2009) / HRWF (02.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A court in Phulbani has come down with the first conviction in the Kandhamal communal riots case. It found Chakradhara Mallick guilty of setting fire to the house of Lokanath Digal, a Christian living in the village of Dampidia. The defendant was sentenced to four years in prison plus a fine of 4,000 rupees (US\$ 70).

The judge found Mallick, a tribal leader who was also involved in other riot-related cases, responsible for instigating others to torch Mr Digal's house.

Fr Thomas Chellan, director of the Pastoral Centre in Konjamendi (Kandhamal) and one of the first Christians victimised by Hindu violence, told AsiaNews that with "this conviction, Kandhamal Christians will be filled with hope that they will receive justice and that normalcy will return to Kandhamal."

At present many Christians are still living in refugee camps, afraid to go home for fear of other attacks.

The atmosphere of insecurity and fear is compounded by constant death threats by Hindu fanatics against Christians and slow police action against those responsible for the violence.

"Witnesses should be given full protection to testify," Father Chellan said; "otherwise they will hesitate to come forth out of fear that they might fall into the hands of villagers."

In fact the people who have been accused for their role the anti-Christian pogrom are also the same ones who are preventing refugees from going home.

Orissa: death threats against Christian witnesses in murder case against BJP politician

by Nirmala Carvalho

Asianews (22.06.2009) / HRWF (25.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Witnesses are being intimidated in order to force them not to testify against Manoj Pradhan, who has been charged in seven murder cases. In the village of Neelungia, Christians are told to pay 4,000 rupees if they want to get back to their homes, whilst Hindus demand they withdraw accusations against those who carried out the pogrom.

Bhubaneshwar (AsiaNews) - Nine witnesses from the village of Raikia (Kandhamal District) have received death threats. They were going to testify against Manoj Pradhan, a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) who was recently elected to the Orissa State Assembly. He is charged on 14 counts of violence, including seven murders, against Christians.

Human rights activist Ajaya Kumar Singh told AsiaNews that "three people, probably Pradhan supporters or relatives threatened the nine Christians. They told them that if they testified against the BJP politician they would be killed."

"The situation is still unstable in many areas where there are no Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) agents," said Sajan, K George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC).

"In the village of Neelungia, near Udayagiri, the predominantly Hindu community has set two conditions to let Christians come back to clear the rubble of their homes. First they want 5,000 rupees (around US\$ 100) for the puja or submission ceremony. Secondly, they want Christians to withdraw their complaint (First Information Report) against villagers who took part in the anti-Christian violence."

Refugee camps in Neelungia village were shut down and Christians now live in tents on the margins of the village.

"The Hindu community is not letting them to go back to their homes," said Sajan George. "And in spite of complaints about continuous threats by extremists police is doing nothing."

India denies visa to US religious freedom watchdogs

By Chidanand Rajghatta

Times of India (17.06.2009) / HRWF 18.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Manmohan Singh government has scuppered a proposed visit to India this week by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a US Congress-mandated organization that monitors religious rights worldwide and gives independent policy recommendations to the US President and his administration.

A USCIRF team that was to leave for New Delhi on June 12 was not given visas in time, according to an associate at the commission, who said it was done with the obvious intent of blocking the trip. "They knew we had tickets for June 12 and the visas are yet to be given, so the inference is obvious...they don't want us to visit," the associate told TOI.

The Indian Embassy in Washington, the issuing authority for the visa, referred all questions to New Delhi, while acknowledging that the USCIRF team had applied for visas and the applications had been forwarded to

New Delhi as is the standard practice for all such visits.

Sources in the government, without acknowledging that the visas were deliberately withheld, said it was not a proper time for such a visit. "We really don't care about what they report," an official who spoke on background said. "But a high profile visit seen as having government sanctions would have raised hackles in India." The USCIRF has in its reports criticized violence against religious minorities in India.

The official said the visa denial was not linked to the criticism of the proposed visit by the Hindu pontiff, Shankaracharya Jayendra Sarawati, who earlier this week described the USCIRF as an "intrusive mechanism of a foreign government which is interfering with the internal affairs of India," and said the team must not be allowed to enter the country.

The Obama administration too did not press for the visit, given that US Undersecretary of State William Burns was in New Delhi around the time of the proposed USCIRF visit, preparing ground for the visit to India by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sometime in July. Most "commissioners" and staff of the USCIRF are appointees of the previous Bush administration.

Although the United States acknowledges India's rich religious and ethnic diversity and plurality, the USCIRF has in its annual reports criticized specific episodes involving violence against religious minority, like the ones in Gujarat and in Orissa.

"We understand India's sensitivities about being criticized for religious discrimination given its democratic and secular credentials," a commission associate said Wednesday. "But we are concerned that some of the

judicial processes with regards to the incidents in Gujarat and Orissa are not functioning properly and we only wanted to get them going."

Indian hardliners, especially those on the extreme right, chafe at the idea that any US body would want to scrutinize the country's religious freedom, given its secular credentials, when it dares not interfere in fundamentalist countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, where minority rights are non-existent. Senior RSS functionaries had specifically inquired repeatedly about the proposed USCIRF visit.

Describing the proposed USCIRF visit to India as "incomprehensible," the US branch of the Vishwa Hindu Parishat said as the "largest functioning democracy in the world with an independent judiciary, a statutorily constituted Human rights Commission, an independent press and other supporting organizations would appear to be quite capable of taking care of the religious freedoms and human rights of its citizens."

"India not only offers freedom of religion under its constitution, but does not discriminate based on religion. Similar freedoms are not available in its neighboring countries," the VHP said on a statement.

But the Indian Left and the "secular" brigade in the US, including organizations representing minorities, argue that allowing such foreign bodies to visit India and

examine its record and performance enhances the country's reputation as an open, democratic nation that has nothing to hide or fear.

Tensions in Kandhamal. Christians still targeted by extremists

By Nirmala Carvalho

AsiaNews (09.06.2009) / HRWF (10.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Tensions and clashes between extremists and police following the arrest of a leader from the Sangh Parivar, guilty of the murder of tribal Christians and officers from the Central Reserve Police Force (Crpf). That is what has taken place in the village of Sirsapanga, Kandhamal district (Orissa).

On June 6th, the widow of a tribal Christian killed in October by Hindu extremists recognised her husband's assassin while she was at the market. Kalia Pradhan, the murderer, had been in hiding for over 9 months but had recently been seen in public places in the village.

Eye-witnesses report that the woman, as soon as she recognised the man, began screaming: "My husband's killer is here" greatly agitating the crowds. Reached by AsiaNews, Sajan K George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians (Gcic) tells that "she went to the police who were initially reluctant to arrest the man, however, her brother telephoned the Superintendent of Police, who immediately ordered the local police to arrest him".

Following the security forces operations, supporters of the Sangh Parivar immediately began protesting outside the Raikia police station demanding the assassins release. Officers dispersed the crowd of protesters and immediately alerted priests and Christians in the area, for fear of fresh tensions.

Sirsapanga village became the theatre of fresh violence when the government decided to withdraw the Crpf force on May 31st last. Coinciding with the demobilisation of the soldiers, sent to the area to protect Christians, the homes of three Christians were set on fire.

Three Christians beaten in two days in Hyderabad

ICC (05.06.2009) / HRWF (09.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that a pastor and two Christians were attacked by Hindu radicals in two separate incidents near Hyderabad, one of India's most developed cities.

Pastor Beaten While Helping His Brothers

Pastor David works in Bowrampet village, and was holding special church services there from May 18 to May 20. The turnout was higher than expected, and incited the jealousy of a local radical Hindu group.

On May 26, David's brothers were attacked and beaten by villagers who thought that they were thieves. When he heard of the attack, David rushed to the location to rescue his brothers. When he arrived, radical Hindus seized him and accused him of forcibly converting Hindus. They beat him and dragged him to the police station and told the

officers that David had been performing forcible conversions. This enraged the police officers on duty, who joined the radical Hindus in beating David again.

David and his brothers sustained minor injuries.

Christian Barbers Beaten for Participating in Children's Program

Just two days later, two Christians were attacked in a different village near Hyderabad. Anjenevelu and Ramesh run a barbershop in Kammadanam village, and had assisted World Vision in conducting a Christian program for the children in their village.

Their involvement in the program angered Hindu radicals, and on May 28 a group of Hindu fanatics forced their way into the barbershop and began beating the two men for "converting people to Christianity."

The two men sustained minor injuries and filed a case with the police station against their attackers.

Jeremy Sewall, ICC's Advocacy Director, said, "We often hear of Christians beaten for their faith in India, but do not have a real picture of what that means. These men were kicked, hit with steel and wooden rods, knocked over, stomped on, and spat upon. It would be the equivalent of a group of men surrounding you and hitting you as hard as they could with baseball bats, over and over again. Please pray that they will recover quickly."

High Court: Courts can decide religious conflicts

'Unshorn hair essential component of Sikhism'

By Saurabh Malik

The Tribune (30.05.2009) / HRWF 09.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Full Bench of the Punjab and Haryana High Court today held that courts could enter into "religious thicket" in case of a conflict.

Comprising Justice JS Khehar, Justice Jasbir Singh and Justice Ajay Kumar Mittal, the Bench also concluded that "maintaining hair unshorn was an essential component of the Sikh religion"; and that admissions under the Sikh minority community quota could be restricted to candidates maintaining "Sikhi swarup" or keeping their hair unshorn.

Asserted the Bench: "In the process of analysis we were persuaded to conclude that a court, in case of a conflict, even on an aspect relating to religion, can enter into the religious thicket to determine the do's and dont's of the religion by relying upon the views expressed by the spokespersons of the said religion..."

"Religion must be perceived as it is, and not as another would like it to be... Once a court arrives at the conclusion that a particular aspect of a religion is fundamental and integral, as per the followers of the faith, it must be given effect to, irrespective of the views expressed on the said issue, based either on science or logic... It is not for the court to determine whether it is forward looking or retrograde." Following are the Bench assertions on various issues.

Sikhism and law

The Gurdwara Acts of 1925 and 1971 are legislative enactments, which have withstood the test of time, wherein 'keshadhari' (a Sikh who maintains hair unshorn) has been incorporated as the fundamental precondition for being vested with the right to be included even in the electoral rolls.

Sikh and hair

Dismissing a petition filed by Gurleen Kaur and other students denied admission to a medical college on the grounds of plucking eyebrows or trimming beard, the Bench, in its 154-page judgment, asserted: "Having dealt with the historical background of the Sikh religion, legislative enactments involving the Sikh religion, the Sikh 'rehatmaryada', the Sikh ardas and views expressed by scholars of Sikhism, we are satisfied they all lead to one unambiguous answer: maintaining hair unshorn is an essential component of the Sikh religion."

Guru Granth Sahib and Sikhism

Guru Granth Sahib has not expressly dealt with the issue of unshorn hair. Guru Granth Sahib is a treatise, limited to the teaching of the moral and spiritual code of conduct to the Sikhs. The Guru Granth Sahib is for the guidance of Sikhs in their pursuit towards spiritual salvation. It does not deal with the code of conduct prescribed for Sikhs. The code of conduct is strictly contained in the "Sikh rehatmaryada..."

Institute's right to deny admission

If a Sikh organisation or body decides not to extend any benefit, which is otherwise available to a Sikh, to a person who does not maintain his hair unshorn, its determination would be perfectly legitimate... Maintaining hair unshorn is part of the religious consciousness of the Sikh faith.

Religion and law

The Bench asserted that besides legality, the issue of trimming beard and plucking eyebrows was to be examined vis-à-vis religion. The action attributed to the petitioners is certainly not in conflict with law.

But then the question to be determined is whether their actions are in conflict with the tenets of the religion, on the basis whereof they are claiming their right. For an issue of religion, an action cannot be bestowed with legitimacy merely because the action is forward-looking and non-fundamentalist.

The Hindu Nationalist Party (BJP) lost also due to the violent attacks in Orissa

by CT Nilesh

AsiaNews (22.05.2009) / HRWF 25.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The biggest loser in the last Indian elections was the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and the reason seems to be that just as in the past, it wanted to use the intercultural and religious tensions (as in Orissa) in order to win. After the results of the elections were declared, the general secretary of BJP, Arun Jaitley admitted that "Even in comparison to our performance in 2004 elections (when they lost), the number of seats have furthermore decreased" from 138 to 116. Not only that, as compared to the last Lok Sabha (parliament) elections, there has been a dip of about 4 to 5 percentage points in

the national vote share. This fact should prompt some serious reflection about the direction this party wants to take.

The Times of India, one of the most read newspaper's in India has come out with a leader in which it clearly states that: "The old ploy of provoking communal riots in order to polarize the electorate, a formula that BJP appears to have stuck to as late as 2008 in case of anti-Christian riots in Orissa, is subject to diminishing returns at the ballot box".

The other two reasons that the media have highlighted as causes for the BJP's debacle are: the projection of Narendra Modi, infamous for the anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002, as a possible candidate for prime minister. And second, for not taking the responsibility nor condemning Arun Gandhi, (member of BJP along with his mother Maneka, and who is also the cousin of Rahul, son of Sonia), for his communal speeches where he said that he will "cut all the hands that threaten the Hindus".

"The criticism within the BJP have brought to light that they (the members of the extremist nationalist party) are losing popularity among the youth as well as among the urban middle class, two segments where it had been strong earlier and which represent the emerging India of 21st century. To reconnect with these segments and devise a winning strategy, it needs to focus on the future rather than obsess with the past. This is a new century, where destroying a mosque in order to build a temple in its place hardly fits in the program of any political party. India has changed dramatically from 1992 to 2009"

In 1992 the per capita income was of Rs.6.100, whilst now it has risen to Rs.38.084 (1 Euro= 65 Rupees). The literacy rate has risen from 52% to 68%.

"How can the BJP redirect itself?" questions the leader of The Times of India.

"It could do so by identifying and filling a gaping lacuna in Indian politics, the lack of centre-right party which speaks the language of reform and harnesses globalization to expand the middle class. That would be incompatible with a Hindu Rashtra plank, but Hindu Rashtra can be substituted with a strong nationalist appeal which would have greater resonance across the country".

The newspaper concludes saying the BJP needs "to cut its ties with the far right" i.e.with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Bajarang Dal and the so called Sangh Parivar (family)[an association of militant Hindus that started the attacks against the Muslims and Christians] . But till the party continues to recruit its leaders amongst the pracharak (preachers) of the RSS it will be impossible to cut its umbilical cord.

Christians in India breathe easier after elections

How Hindu extremist BJP will respond to surprising defeat, though, remains to be seen

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (21.05.2009) / HRWF 25.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Christians in India are heaving a sigh of relief after the rout of a Hindu nationalist party in national and state assembly elections in Orissa state, a scene of anti-Christian arson and carnage last year.

The ruling centrist party won a second term, but concerns over persecution of minorities remain.

A local centrist party, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), took charge of the government of the eastern state of Orissa today, and tomorrow the new federal government led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will be sworn in, representing a second term for the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), led by the left-of-center Indian National Congress, commonly known as the Congress Party.

"The election result is a statement against the persecution of non-Hindus," Vijay Simha, a senior journalist and political analyst, told Compass.

"There were a string of incidents against non-Hindus, which were principally enacted by right-wing outfits," added Simha, who reported on anti-Christian violence in Kandhamal district of Orissa in August-September 2008. "Since the vote went against right-wing parties, the result is a strong rejection of extremist religious programs."

John Dayal, secretary general of the All India Christian Council (AICC), said the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was "defeated not by Christians or Muslims, but by secular Hindus."

Over 80 percent of the more than 1 billion people in India are Hindu. Christians form around 2.3 percent of the population, and Muslims about 14 percent.

The Times of India on Saturday (May 16) quoted Rahul Gandhi, general secretary of the Congress Party, as saying that his party's victory was a rejection of politics of caste and religion and acceptance of "clean and honest" policies symbolized by Prime Minister Singh.

"Internal criticisms within the BJP have brought out that it is losing popularity among youth as well as among the urban middle classes, two segments where it had been strong earlier and which represent the emergent India of the 21st century," stated an editorial in the daily.

Crossroads

The BJP's defeat at the national level is expected to compel the party to decide whether it turns to moderation in its ideology or more extremism in desperation.

"The BJP now faces a dilemma ... Its appeal based on Hindutva [Hindu nationalism] and divisiveness stands rejected by the electorate," wrote Prem Prakash of ANI news agency. "Where does the party go from here? ... The party seems to be waiting for the RSS to provide answers for all this . . . The time has come for it to clearly define what kind of secularism it accepts or preaches."

Hopes of Christians, however, abound.

"I am hoping that the BJP will learn that it does not pay to persecute minorities, and that civilized Hindus are disgusted with divisive antics of the RSS family," said the AICC's Dayal.

Father Dominic Emmanuel of the Delhi Catholic Archdiocese is also hopeful.

"Let's hope that the new government would work harder to protect all minorities, particularly the constitutional guarantees with regard to religious freedom," he said.

Father Babu Joseph of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India said, "The Indian Catholic bishops are confident that the Congress Party-led UPA government will keep its promises of safeguarding the country from communal and divisive forces and restore confidence

among all sections of people, particularly among the religious minorities for providing a stable, secular and democratic government.”

Threats Continue

The defeat of the BJP, however, may not bring much respite to those facing persecution at the hands of Hindu nationalist groups.

“One would expect a lessening in persecution of Christians and other non-Hindus – however, extremist groups often step up activities to garner funds and patronage when they are on the retreat,” warned journalist Simha. “So, one could also see a rise in anti-minority activities.”

The BJP, which began ruling the federal government in 1998, was defeated by the Congress Party in 2004, which, too, was seen as a mandate against Hindu nationalism. Prime Minister Singh said during his swearing in ceremony in May 2004 that the mandate for the Congress-led UPA was for change and “strengthening the secular foundation of our republic.”

After the BJP’s defeat, however, Christian persecution did not stop. According to the Christian Legal Association, at least 165 anti-Christian attacks were reported in 2005, and over 130 in 2006. In 2007, the number of incidents rose to over 1,000, followed by the worst-ever year, 2008, for the Christian minority in India.

Forsaking its extremist ideology could also be difficult for the BJP because there was a leadership change in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist conglomerate and the parent organization of the BJP, a month before the elections. On March 21, Mohan Rao Bhagwat, formerly general secretary, was made the head of the RSS.

On March 22, The Hindu quoted an anonymous leader of the BJP as saying, “Mr. Bhagwat has clarity in ideology; he is a quick decision-maker; he takes everybody along; and he expects 100 per cent implementation of decisions.”

A day before his ascent to the top position, Bhagwat had sent a message to RSS workers across the country to come out in full force and “ensure 100 percent voting” in “the interest of Hindus” during this year’s elections, added the daily.

Further, after the BJP’s defeat in 2004, sections of the cadre of the RSS and affiliated groups broke away from the conglomerate as they felt the organization was too “moderate” to be able to establish a Hindu nation. Among the known Hindu splinter groups are the Abhinav Bharat (Pride of India), which operates mainly in the north-central state of Madhya Pradesh and the western state of Maharashtra, and the Sri Ram Sene (Army of Rama, a Hindu god), which recently became infamous for its violently misogynistic moral policing in the city of Mangalore, Karnataka.

Furthermore, there are pockets, especially in the central parts of the country and parts of Karnataka in the south, where the BJP remains a dominant party.

Embarrassing Defeat

Results of the general elections and state assembly polls in Orissa and the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, which were held simultaneously between April 16 and May 13, were declared on Saturday (May 16).

Of the 543 parliamentary constituencies, 262 went to the UPA. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the BJP, got 160, while the Third Front, a grouping of smaller and regional parties led by communists, bagged only 79.

The Congress Party alone won 206 seats, whereas the BJP's count was 116 – a strong indication that a majority of the people in Hindu-majority India are against Hindu extremism.

The UPA has the support of 315 Members of Parliament, far higher than the 272 minimum needed to form government.

The embarrassing defeat for the BJP came as a surprise. Hoping to gain from its hardcore Hindu nationalist image, the BJP had made leader Narendra Modi, accused of organizing an anti-Muslim pogrom in the western state of Gujarat in 2002, its star campaigner.

Modi, chief minister of Gujarat, spoke in around 200 election rallies, out of which the party could win only 18 seats outside Gujarat.

In Orissa, where the BJP had openly supported the spate of attacks on Christians in Kandhamal district following the murder of a Hindu nationalist leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, by Maoists on Aug. 23, 2008, the party won not a single parliamentary seat – not even in Kandhamal.

The BJP candidate for the Kandhamal constituency, Ashok Sahu, contested from jail, as he was arrested on April 14 for making an inflammatory speech against Christians. Sahu hoped to gain the sympathy of Hindus by going to jail.

The BJP was sharing power with the ruling BJD in Orissa until March 17. The BJD broke up its 11-year-old alliance with the BJP over its role in the violence that lasted for over a month and killed more than 127 people and destroyed 315 villages, 4,640 houses, 252 churches and 13 educational institutions, besides rendering more than 50,000 homeless.

Even in the state assembly elections in Orissa, the BJP faced a debacle. Of the 147 seats, it won only seven. The BJD swept the polls with 109 seats. The Congress Party managed to get 27.

The seven assembly seats won by the BJP include two from Kandhamal district. The BJP's Manoj Pradhan, who is facing 14 cases of rioting and murder in connection with the Kandhamal violence, won the G. Udayagiri assembly seat in Kandhamal. In the Balliguda assembly constituency, also in Kandhamal, BJP sitting legislator Karendera Majhi retained the seat. Both G. Udayagiri and Balliguda were at the epicenter of the last year's violence.

Even in Andhra Pradesh state, where Hindu nationalist groups have launched numerous attacks on Christians in the last few years, the BJP had a poor showing. Of the 42 parliamentary seats, the Congress Party won 33. The BJP's count was nil.

In assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh, the Congress Party won 158 of the 294 seats, gaining a majority to form the state government for another five-year term. The BJP did not get even one seat.

In the northern state of Uttarakhand, where the BJP is a ruling party, its count was zero. The Congress Party won all five parliamentary seats.

In Rajasthan state, also in the north, the BJP could win only four seats. The Congress Party, on the other hand, won 20. The BJP had passed an anti-conversion law in 2006 when it was a ruling party. The bill is yet to be signed by the state governor.

In the 2009 election, the BJP got 10 seats in the eastern state of Chhattisgarh, where the Congress Party got only one. In the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, the BJP won three of the four seats.

In the eastern state of Jharkhand, the BJP bagged eight seats, and the Congress Party only one. In Gujarat, the BJP's tally was 15, whereas the Congress won 11. In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP won 16 and Congress 12.

Recent incidents of persecution

By Mahruaii Sailo and Binaifer Wadia

Compass Direct (19.05.2009) / HRWF (20.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Karnataka - Police on May 12 arrested Christians in Chennarayapatna, Hassan district on trumped-up charges of fraudulent conversions after a group of Hindu extremists attacked them. The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported that at 3 p.m. nearly 25 assailants led by a Hindu extremist identified only as Lokesh barged into Sidda Vinayaka School, where members of Every Home Crusade ministry were holding a prayer meeting. The attackers beat pastors K.K. Ramesh and P.S. Anjaneya and falsely accused them of fraudulent conversion; the intolerant Hindus also snatched Bibles and hymnals, piled them up and burned them. A GCIC regional coordinator told Compass that three Christians identified only as 25-year-old Sangarasimha, 35-year-old Calton and Manjunath were beaten as they tried to protect women present. Manjunath was bleeding from his ear and from cuts on his face. Officers from the Chennarayapatna police station arrived at around 4 p.m. and, as is customary in India, arrested the victims of the attack. Along with Sangarasimha, Calton and Manjunath, officers took K.K. Ramesh and P.S. Anjaneya to a police station, and only with GCIC intervention were they released without charges that night at 10:45 p.m. - BW

Orissa - Hindu extremists attacked Christians in Mondakai relief camp on May 11 in Kandhamal. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that, under cover of darkness, extremists beating drums and chanting Hindu devotionals tried to enter the camp where about 1,500 Christian refugees have stayed since last August's anti-Christian violence. The Hindu hardliners attacked Swasti Nayak, a Christian who was standing near the camp's main gate, leaving him with minor injuries. Police patrolling the camp intervened soon after, keeping the crowd of attackers at bay. Christian leaders met with state authorities to demand additional police protection. At press time, no additional forces were deployed. - MS

Manipur - Alleged Hindu nationalists burned two church buildings in Phumlou and Phayeng on May 10 and another in Taolong on May 11. The Evangelical Fellowship of India reported that at about 10:40 p.m. on May 10, a newly organized group attacked the Baptist and Catholic churches in Phumlou and Phayeng and the next day attacked the Evangelical Churches Association building in Taolong. Gutted in the fire were parts of the buildings and furniture, pulpits, curtains, mats, microphones and sound system speakers. Madhu Chandra, general secretary of the All India Christian Council, told Compass, "A Hindutva-like communal force is suspected to be behind the serial attacks on churches targeting the Meitei Christians. We have submitted a memorandum to the state's chief minister expressing our concern and to take appropriate action." Police registered a First Information Report but no arrests had been made at press time. - MS

Jammu and Kashmir - Police in Plaura on May 10 stopped Sunday worship and arrested pastor Virender Joseph and a church member identified only as Eddie, booking them for

"suspicious persons roaming around" under section 109 of the Police Act. A Compass contact said officers took the two Christians to the police station and baselessly accused them of harassing people and creating problems in society because of their faith. The Christians were released on bail the next day. Waris Gill, president of the Jammu chapter of the Christian Legal Association, told Compass that the two Christians will appear in court on June 2. "Arresting the two innocent Christians on baseless grounds," he added, "is simply an abuse of power by the state police." – MS

Tamil Nadu – On May 8 members of the Hindu extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh interrupted a Good Shepherd Community Church screening of the "Jesus Film" and accused pastor Kandha Swamy of forceful conversion in Erode district. The All Indian Christian Council (AICC) reported that the attackers, led by an extremist identified only as Murgesab, barged into the house of the pastor, verbally abused him and warned him to vacate his house. Police arrived during the middle of the film and took all equipment, including a ministry team vehicle, to the police station. Moses Vatipalli of the AICC told Compass that due to the police pressure, the assailants and the victims reached an agreement whereby the Christians stated in writing that they must obtain permission from police prior to any Christian activities in the area. – MS

Madhya Pradesh – Police arrested five Christian workers on charges of forceful conversion on May 7 in Narshinghpur. The Evangelical Fellowship of India reported that five Christian guests from Jeevan Lal Church and Campus Crusade for Christ were invited to a home for Bible study when Hindu extremists shouting Hindu devotional slogans stormed in. The assailants beat the visitors, including Melar Selwan, who sustained a broken arm. Police arrived and, as is customary in India, took the five victims to Amgaon police station. Both parties filed police complaints, but the Christians were arrested under Section 295(A) of the Indian Penal Code for "malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings or any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs." The Christians were released on bail the next day. – MS

Maharashtra – About 30 Hindu hardliners who are followers of Swami Narendra Maharaj on May 5 attacked a revival meeting, injuring 10 Christians, including a 5-year-old girl at Damodar Hall, Nalasopara (east), Mumbai. The Hindustan Times reported that at 1 p.m. the extremists broke into a meeting organized by the Vasai Taluka Christian Pastors Association, locked the doors and windows of the hall and forced the Christians to chant "Jai Shri Ram (Praise Lord Ram)." Those who refused were beaten. Pastor James Samuel received hospital treatment for head wounds, while 10 others including the young girl were left with bruises. Police have arrested Sanjay Keer, his wife Sushma, Deepak Vairagade, Pramod Viraskar and Rajesh Kanade, all followers of Narendra Maharaj. The extremists were arrested and charged with rioting, unlawful assembly and voluntarily causing grievous hurt. Dr. Abraham Mathai, vice chairman of the state minorities commission, told Compass that a plainclothes constable from the Nalasopara police station "led the mob attack on a Christian prayer meeting, and this reflects poorly on the secular principles of our police force." – BW

Andhra Pradesh – Hindu extremists on May 4 set ablaze Holy Spirit Church in Warrangal, resulting in property damages of 100,000 rupees (US\$2,061). The All Indian Christian Council reported that at around 2 a.m. the attackers broke down the door and burned the church building from the inside, destroying it and furniture, Bibles, gospel literature, the sound system and carpets. Area church leaders filed a police complaint. Pastor Emaddi Clinton told Compass that the church was completely burned down. At press time a police investigation was underway. – MS

Chhattisgarh – Members of the Hindu extremist Bajrang Dal, youth wing of the World Hindu Council, on May 3 attacked a youth prayer meeting led by a Christian woman, Neeshi Nath, in Bilaspur, a source told Compass. At the evening meeting, the intolerant Hindus burned Bibles and gospel tracts, broke household goods and threatened further

harm if those present continued Christian activities. The Christians filed a police complaint, and officers registered a First Information Report at Koni police station. No arrests had been made at press time. – MS

Himachal Pradesh – In Salon, Hindu hardliners on May 1 attacked and threatened pastor Suresh Masih Bhatti of the Believers' Church as he was working in the Subhathu area. A church representative told Compass that about six extremists led by Sunil Sheena stopped the pastor after he had visited church members' homes. The intolerant Hindus accused the pastor of forceful conversion, beat him and threatened further harm if he conducted future Christian meetings. The pastor filed a police complaint, and officers registered a First Information Report against the attackers. The Rev. Biju Solomon of Believers' Church in Salon told Compass that there was no attempted forcible conversion. "Hindu extremist Sunil Sheena made a public apology to the pastor and gave in writing that he would not repeat such things in future," he added. – MS

Chhattisgarh – Members of the Chhattisgarh Sikh Youth Association on April 30 beat Jaspal Singh Saluja in Shyamnagar for converting to Christianity, according to a Compass contact. The extremists barged into Saluja's house at about 10 p.m. and assaulted him, also damaging furniture and household goods. The Christian received minor injuries. Saying he forgave the Hindu extremists, Saluja opted not to file charges against them. – MS

Jammu and Kashmir – A 70-year-old pastor in Bashi Nagar village who was arrested on April 8 after a flurry of false accusations, from kidnapping to fraudulent conversion, was reportedly tortured while in custody. By the time radical Hindus had persuaded police to arrest A.K. Captain Samuel, officers were claiming the pastor of a 350-member church was a terrorist. Eventually police charged him under Section 153(A) of the Ranbir Penal Code for "promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion and doing acts prejudiced to maintenance of harmony." Marcus Gill, president of the Jammu and Kashmir Christian Forum, told media that there was no case for fraudulent conversion, adding, "We condemn the arrest of the pastor, who is innocent . . . He was falsely accused and arrested without any proof." Christians in Jammu said the incident was part of a larger targeting of the Christian community. With police ordering him to halt his evangelistic efforts, Samuel was released on bail on May 14 on the condition that he leave Jammu. At press time, he had relocated to the state of Punjab but was expected to appear in court again on May 25. – MS

Orissa government cuts death toll from anti-Christian pogrom

by Nirmala Carvalho

AsiaNews (12.05.2009) / HRWF 25.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – The Orissa State government and the diocese of Bhubaneswar, in the State's capital, are at loggerheads over the number of people who were killed in last August's anti-Christian pogroms. State authorities have reported fewer casualties than Mgr Raphael Cheenath, archbishop of Cuttak-Bhubaneswar.

"The petitioner's list included the names of RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) activists, Dhanurjaya Pradhani, Ajit Kumar Mallick and Prabhat Panigrahi, allegedly killed by naxalites," said the authorities for whom 42 people, and not 93, died in the Hindu-led anti-Christian violence.

"In ten cases people are still alive, in 25 cases people have died because of chronic and other medical problems, in 12 cases the reference/history of the persons with reported

names could not be traced in villages mentioned against their names, and in two cases the villages mentioned could not be located," the State government said.

Contacted by AsiaNews, Sajan K George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC), slammed the government "for its false justifications", its failure to assume responsibilities for the refugees and its attempt "to cut compensation to the victims."

"Saying that people are missing, does not mean that they disappeared in thin air," said the GCIC president.

What is more, the government is trying to exclude people who died from their wounds months after the violence.

The GCIC has a list of 123 people killed during the anti-Christian violence, which includes everyone who became a victim of the violence perpetrated by the Sangh Parivar, the nationalist umbrella group that includes the RSS.

George does not exclude the possibility that his list might include the names of some Hindu extremists, but rejects out of hand the State's attempt to impose its shorter list over that provided by the diocese of Bhubaneswar.

In their latest claim State authorities even contradict what they had reported last year.

In November 2008 during a visit to Kandhamal by a delegation of the Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist (CPI_ML), a State official had estimated the death toll to be around 500 people, saying that he had personally authorised the cremation of at least 200 people (see [AsiaNews report](#)).

Fr Dibya Singh, who represents the Church before state authorities, also rejects speculation by the authorities. As far as he is concerned, the state claim that ten people are still alive "is not true."

"People died either in the relief camps or elsewhere. Two, who were nearly beaten to death, succumbed to their injuries later," he explained.

In the meantime the situation in Kandhamal remains tense. Last night some Hindu extremists tried to storm a camp in Mondakia where about 1,500 Christian refugees have found shelter but were stopped by police.

Also yesterday Khonds (known as Kondhs as well), an aboriginal tribe that represents more than 50 per cent of the population in Kandhamal district, filed a petition in the Supreme Court, accusing the government of Orissa of favouring Christians and appropriating their land to give to refugees for church building.

Stakes high for Christians in India's elections

Beleaguered minority has much to lose, gain in polls

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (01.05.2009) / HRWF (05.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - With elections underway in India, its 2.3 percent Christian minority - which faced a deadly spate of attacks in the eastern state of Orissa last year - is praying for a secular party to come to power.

Along with the Muslim community, Christians fear that if the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies form the next government or an ideologically loose coalition comes to the helm, their already compromised welfare may further deteriorate. Dr. John Dayal, secretary general of the All India Christian Council, said that the end of the Congress Party's monopoly on power in the 1990s led to the rise of several major individual groups, including the BJP, political wing of the Hindu extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) conglomerate.

"The rise of regional and linguistic or caste-based parties spells a danger for pan-national minorities, as parties with a narrow and localized outlook will have neither the strength nor the political need to come to their defense," Dayal told Compass. "What is at stake now, as never before, is the stability and consistency of India's constitutional institutions in their response to critical situations, their zeal to correct wrongs and their commitment to the welfare of the weakest and the lowest."

Religious minorities, Dayal said, were hoping for a strong showing by a secular party, "possibly the Congress [Party]," supported by regional groups of a secular character.

"Personally, I would even welcome a Third Front [a grouping of anti-Congress Party and anti-BJP parties led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist] government supported by the Congress Party," he added. "Certainly, a BJP-led government is the least desirable, as we fear major erosion and even regression in issues of freedom of faith, Dalit liberation and affirmative action for the poor."

With the BJP in power, directly or as part of the ruling alliance, in 10 states – Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Punjab in the north; Chhattisgarh and Bihar in the east; Gujarat in the west; Nagaland and Meghalaya in the northeast; and Karnataka in the south – he said Christians believe it is important that a strong, secular government comes into power at the federal level.

The federal government can issue warnings and ultimately dismiss state legislatures and state executives if they fail to protect the lives of their people or major unrest erupts. The federal government can also make laws applicable across the nation.

The BJP-ruled states have become "absolutely inhospitable" and "hostile" to Christians thanks to the "inaction of the federal government," said Sajan K. George, national president of the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC).

Orissa, Andhra Pradesh

The eyes of Christians are also on state assembly elections in Orissa state.

Orissa is ruled by the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), which on March 7 broke its 11-year-old alliance with the BJP over the latter's involvement in Kandhamal district violence. Elections in Orissa, held on April 16 and 23, are particularly important given that the results will either embolden Hindu nationalists to launch more attacks to polarize voters along religious lines or compel them to abstain from violence.

In December 2007, a series of brutal attacks began in Kandhamal. The violence that lasted for around 10 days killed at least four Christians and burned 730 houses and 95 churches under the pretext of avenging an alleged attack on Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, a leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council).

Violence re-erupted in the district following the killing of Saraswati on August 23, 2008. A Maoist group took responsibility for the murder, but BJP supporters claimed that Christians were behind the assassination.

The BJP has made the killing of Saraswati its main election plank. The party's two candidates from Kandhamal – Manoj Pradhan for the G. Udaygiri assembly seat and Ashok Sahu for the Kandhamal parliamentary constituency – contested the elections from jail. Pradhan, a primary suspect in the August-September 2008 violence, has been in jail for the last few months. Sahu, a former senior police official, was arrested on April 14 for delivering a hate speech against Christians in the run-up to elections. He was released on bail on April 17.

In its election campaign, the BJD promised to provide protection to the Christian community in Kandhamal and elsewhere in the state, putting the blame of the Kandhamal violence entirely on the BJP.

"It was important to break up with the BJP because I don't consider them healthy any longer for my state after Kandhamal – which I think is very apparent to everyone," Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik told CNN-IBN on April 19. "Before Kandhamal, we were lucky in the early years of the state government not to have a serious communal problem at all. But Kandhamal was very tragic and serious."

According to the CNN-IBN private news channel, the Congress Party could benefit from the divorce of the BJD and the BJP. Nevertheless, the BJD is expected to form the next state government in Orissa.

The Congress Party, on the other hand, blamed both the BJD and the BJP for last year's violence.

Elections in Kandhamal took place despite the fact that over 3,000 Christians were still in relief camps and hundreds of others had fled to other parts of the state fearing more tensions. Father Ajay Kumar Singh of the Catholic Archdiocese of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar reached Kandhamal from the neighboring Gajapati district early on April 16, election day. "Along the way, we came across numerous felled trees blocking the road in at least six places," Fr. Singh told Compass. "The roads were deserted, and my colleagues and I were scared. But we somehow managed to reach Kandhamal."

He added that in Dharampur in Raikia Block and in Kattingia near Tiangia in G. Udaygiri Block – where eight Christians were killed during last year's violence – Christians were threatened if they did not vote for the BJP.

In Nilungia village, seven kilometers (four miles) from G. Udaygiri, where a Christian was killed, at least 40 Christians did not cast their votes out of fear of a backlash, Fr. Singh said.

"They feared tensions if they returned to their village and stayed out of the district," he said.

The Catholic Church in Orissa had urged the Election Commission of India to postpone elections in Kandhamal, but polls were held as scheduled.

According to the district administration, the poll turnout on April 16 in Kandhamal was around 55 percent.

The violence following Saraswati's murder lasted for over a month, killing more than 127 people and destroying 315 villages, 4,640 houses, 252 churches and 13 educational institutions, besides rendering more than 50,000 homeless.

The incidence of Christian persecution is high in Andhra Pradesh, too. Analysts anticipate a neck-to-neck competition between the ruling Congress Party and the regional Telugu

Desam Party (TDP), which recently allied with Left parties in the Third Front. The BJP is also in the fray but doesn't appear strong enough to stake claim to power in the state.

Obscure Prognosis

With election results not due until May 16, the outlook at this point is murky.

"About all that can be said with certainty in the resulting alphabet soup of political parties is that the BJP won't be aligning with Congress, or with the Left. Beyond that it's a numbers game," The Times of India noted in an editorial today. "Most observers agree that alignments determining who will form the next government will be decided only after the elections."

The national daily added, "As India's long, hot election summer grinds on, with the third phase held yesterday and the fifth and final phase not scheduled before the 13th of this month, it's regrettable that no overarching themes have emerged even at this late stage, which can define the election."

With 714 million eligible voters of the more than 1 billion people in the country, the five-phase elections for the 15th Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) and for the state assemblies of Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and the north-eastern state of Sikkim began on April 16.

The three main parties are the left-of-center Congress Party (officially known as the Indian National Congress), which leads the governing United Progressive Alliance (UPA); the Hindu nationalist BJP, a leading party of the opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA); and the Third Front.

A party and its allies need 272 members to rule in the 545-member Lok Sabha.

Expediency over Ideology

The regional and caste parties involved include the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), headed by Dalit (formerly "untouchable") woman Mayawati, chief minister of Uttar Pradesh state in the north; and the Samajwadi Party (SP), also a powerful party in that state.

Other significant parties are the Janata Dal-United (JD-U) party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) party in the eastern state of Bihar; the BJD in Orissa; the Trinamool Congress party in the eastern state of West Bengal; the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and the Shiv Sena party in the western state of Maharashtra; the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) party and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party in the southern state of Tamil Nadu; the TDP and Telangana Rashtriya Samiti (TRS) party in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, and the Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S) party in the southern state of Karnataka.

The Congress Party is hoping that it will be supported by the SP, the RJD, the Trinamool Congress party, the NCP, the DMK, and the TRS in case it emerges as the single-largest party post-elections. The JD-U, the Shiv Sena and the AIADMK, on the other hand, are likely to extend their support to the BJP-led NDA. The BSP, the BJD, the TDP, and the JD-S are expected to join the Third Front.

Most of these smaller parties, however, are keeping their options open and will formally declare their allegiances only after the results are announced on May 16.

Decade of Persecution

The concern of Indian Christians can be understood against the backdrop of the decade since 1998, when the BJP, under the aegis of the NDA, came into power at the federal level, marking the beginning of systematic persecution of Christians.

In January 1999, an Australian missionary, Graham Staines, and his two young sons were burned alive in Orissa's Keonjhar district. From 2000 to 2004, around 200 anti-Christian attacks were reported each year from various parts of the nations. In March 2004, India's second massive spate of anti-Christian attacks took place in the Jhabua district of the central state of Madhya Pradesh.

The incidence of persecution remained high despite the change of the federal government in mid-2004 – after the Congress Party-led UPA defeated the BJP-led NDA.

At least 165 anti-Christian attacks were reported in 2005, and over 130 in 2006. Including the Orissa attacks, the total number of violent anti-Christian incidents rose to over 1,000 in 2007. And 2008 turned out to be the worst year for the Christians as violence returned in Kandhamal.

"The results of the elections on May 16 will show whether the ideology of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the father of the nation who promoted communal harmony, will prevail in India, or that of his killer Nathuram Godse, allegedly a member of the RSS," said George of the GCIC.

India briefs: recent incidents of persecution

By Mahruaii Sailo, Binaifer Wadia and Shireen Bhatia

Compass Direct (30.04.2009) / HRWF (05.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – On April 20 a group of Sikhs in Dalli Rajhara, Durg district attacked Christian pastors who had converted from the Sikh religion. A source told Compass the pastors were guest speakers from New Delhi at a Christian event organized by Christian Community Church, where about 200 people were in attendance. At about 9:30 p.m., leaders from the Sikh community streamed into the church building and beat the visiting Christians, accusing them of forceful conversion and disrupting the community. Local Christian leaders denied that any forceful conversions were attempted. The Sikh community leaders were offended that the visiting converts, who still followed their cultural norm of wearing turbans and sporting beards, were preaching in the area; the Sikh leaders termed them traitors and demanded their arrests, later submitting memorandums of complaint to the state governor, chief minister and home minister. Police arrived and sent the pastors back to New Delhi. The state chief minister assured the Sikh community that the government would investigate, reported the Evangelical Fellowship of India, but host pastor Edison Sagar said no action has been taken against the converts and calm has returned to the area. – MS

Maharashtra – Nearly 25 Hindu extremists on April 19 vandalized a 100-year-old church in Saoner, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) from Nagpur. The Times of India reported that during Sunday Mass the extremists stormed the Douglas Memorial Church chanting "Jai Shree Ram, Jai Bajrang [Hail Lord Ram, Hail Lord Bajrang]," tore up several books including the sanctuary Bible and ransacked the building, damaging furniture, musical instruments and the altar. Armed with sticks and swords, the 20 to 25 attackers also shattered windows of the mission school bus parked in front of the church, the national daily reported. The extremists hurled a sharp trident-like weapon at the Rev. Mark Madhukar Sakharpakar, who had just begun his sermon, but he escaped unhurt. One of the attackers reportedly told him, "Next time it will be worse." Two women, Aruna Telkhande and Preeti Dongre, received minor injuries. Nagpur district police arrested

seven persons for the attack, including two who belonged to the Hindu extremist Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal. – BW

Chhattisgarh – Hindu extremists from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other groups on April 15 falsely accused a pastor of keeping cartons of liquor on Church of Christ premises in Tarbahar, Bilaspur. A source told Compass that someone planted about 10 cartons of alcohol at his home on the church premises in order to falsely accuse the pastor, as it is illegal to store such large amounts of alcohol at home. The Hindu hardliners arrived at the church premises, accused pastor Markus Ram of illegally storing the liquor and dragged him to the police station at about 2 a.m., pressuring police to file a case against him. Police took a statement from the pastor, but local Christian leaders arrived and met with government officials, and Pastor Ram was released at about 2 p.m. A police investigation, however, was still underway at press time. – MS

Chhattisgarh – Police on April 15 arrested a Christian on charges of forceful conversion in the Chakarbhata area, near Bilaspur. A source told Compass that the hard-line Hindus falsely accused Gyan Singh of illegally “luring” four people to Christianity by inviting them to a church service at the chapel of Mission Hospital in Bilaspur. Hindus Ramesh Bareth, Ganesh Kaushik and two identified only as Arjun and Dhuri, later accused Singh of forceful conversion, and word spread quickly. Soon a mob of Hindu extremists gathered at the Chakarbhata police station and filed a police complaint against the Christians. Unable to find evidence of allurements or forced conversion, police charged Singh with “promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion” (Section 153-A of the Indian Penal Code) and “deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings” (Section 295-A). Local church leaders denied any wrongdoing by Christians in the area. – MS

Karnataka – Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) extremists on April 12 beat pastor Rajesh Kurdekar and falsely accused him of forceful conversion after disrupting worship in Analekoppa, Sagar Taluk, Shimoga district. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that an area extremist identified only as Chowdappa led some 20 assailants in the attack on the Patmos Prayer Hall. Some of the intolerant Hindus took photographs of the congregation and warned them against participating in any future worship at the site and threatened to use the photographs as evidence against the pastor of “conversion activities” – though conversion is not illegal in India. Sources told Compass that police at the Sagar City police station refused to accept Pastor Kurdekar’s complaint and warned him against creating a “nuisance” by conducting prayer services. “No worship was held on April 19, as no one came for the service for fear of the extremists,” said one source. – BW

Chhattisgarh – Hindu extremists assaulted pastor Somnal Bhagal of Jehovah Pentecostal Mission as he was returning from a prayer meeting on April 7. A source told Compass that a man identified only as Patel objected to the prayer meetings and had threatened to harm the pastor if he continued leading them. As Pastor Bhagal was returning home from the April 7 prayer meeting, Patel’s wife stopped him and accused him of staring at her. Patel and three others then beat Pastor Bhagal, disparaging him and Christianity. The pastor filed a police complaint but no arrests had been made at press time. Local Christians said they believed that the attack was premeditated. – MS

Chhattisgarh – Police arrested Christian social workers on charges of forceful conversion on April 7 in Pratap Chowk. A source told Compass that workers from the Hindu extremist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) accused the social workers travelling in election-duty vehicles of carrying Christian literature and anti-Hindu stickers. The BJP workers found the books and accused the Christians of forcible conversion and trying to “pollute the minds” of people against Hinduism. The Christians steadfastly denied the charges, maintaining that the extremists planted the books to falsely implicate them. Police detained the Christians for about eight hours and were released on bail. – MS

Andhra Pradesh – In Dharmapuri village, Karimnagar district a about 40 Hindu extremists shouting slogans broke into the house of a Christian on April 6 and, using abusive language, dragged a visiting pastor and three women to the police station. The pastor, 67-year-old Prabhu Dass, told Compass that the family living in the house had invited him and the other Christians for prayer, but the Hindu extremists charged him with attempting forcible conversion, registering a First Information Report against him. "Along with three Christian women visiting their house, I was taken to the police station while one man among us escaped," Pastor Dass told Compass. He and others were released on bail after much difficulty on April 9, he said. "They have threatened sister Radha, the lady of the house I visited, to give witness against me in the court," said a terrified Pastor Dass. "They shot my photograph, and it was telecast on the local television channels and three local newspapers the very next day." He termed the incident part of a larger conspiracy of Hindu extremists against area Christians. – SB

Karnataka – Hindu nationalists on April 5 attacked pastor M. Abel as he was on his way to preach as a guest at the House of Salvation Church in Chamrajnagar district. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that at about 1 p.m. a mob led by Goundar Gurupadappa, along with two policemen from Anoor police station in Vadarpalaya village, stopped Pastor Abel; an officer identified only as Suresh began beating him and falsely accusing him of forceful conversion. At the church's rented facility, the intolerant Hindus also took Senior Pastor Samuel Ravi and the local church pastor who had invited him to speak, identified only as Abraham, to nearby Lingayat Mutt and warned them not to conduct any further worship or prayer services. They also warned two other area churches, Pentecostal Church and Bethesda, in the same village against holding worship services. Ravi told Compass that no Christian worship was held April 12 and April 19, as the landlord made them vacate the premises, and no one was willing to rent them a hall out of fear of the Hindu extremists. – BW

Andhra Pradesh – A member of the Hindu extremist Bajrang Dal, youth wing of the World Hindu Council, on March 28 threatened to kill pastor G. Timothy of the Brethren Fellowship if he did not leave his village in Warrangal within 48 hours. The All Indian Christian Council (AICC) reported that a Bajrang Dal worker identified only as Ravi barged into the pastor's house and told him to come outside with him. When the pastor refused, Ravi began insulting the pastor and his faith and threatened to murder him. A group of extremists had recently attacked two new converts of the church and had reportedly threatened to continue the violence if the fellowship continued to meet. Additionally, the church sound system had recently been stolen, according to the AICC. The pastor filed a police complaint but no arrests had been made at press time. – MS

Andhra Pradesh – Hindu hardliners on March 27 attacked a pastor and other Christians in Hyderabad. The All Indian Christian Council reported that pastor Pramodam Joshua of Shalom Bible Church and members of his leadership team were on their way back home from the meeting at a church member's rented home when three Hindu extremists stopped them. They accused the pastor of forceful conversion and started beating him, his son and a Christian identified only as Yaeeru. The pastor received hospital treatment for internal injuries. The Hindu extremists also threatened the landlord of the hosting church member's house for allowing them to hold a prayer service there. Local Christian leaders filed a police complaint at Amberbet police station, but no arrests had been made at press time. – MS

Andhra Pradesh – Hindu extremists in Chitoor on March 24 burned a church building, resulting in damages totaling 30,000 rupees (US\$600). The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that Hindu hardliners set ablaze the Jesus Prayer House Church, damaging Bibles, hymnals and furniture and destroying the thatched structure. A church representative told Compass that the pastor had received several threats from the Hindu extremist Bajrang Dal, youth wing of the World Hindu Council, warning him not to lead

worship meetings in the area. The pastor filed a police complaint at Renigunta police station, but no arrests had been made at press time. – MS

Gujarat Muslims the 'living dead'

BBC (27.04.2009) / HRWF (29.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Muslims in India's Gujarat state who bore the brunt of religious riots in 2002 say they have been abandoned by the political parties. The BBC's Soutik Biswas met some riot victims ahead of the general election in the state.

The acrid smell of burning oil singes your nose and eyes as you walk into Bombay Hotel, a sprawling ghetto of Muslim-owned homes on the eastern flank of Ahmedabad, the main city in western Gujarat state.

A pall of black factory smoke hangs over this untidy patchwork of squat, ugly houses. Residents pay 150 rupees (\$3) a month to a private contractor who supplies yellow-coloured drinking water through dirty garden pipes. Sewage flows out into the street.

Bombay Hotel, which takes its name after a local roadside eatery, is one of the places where many Muslims displaced by the 2002 Gujarat riots moved to. Over the past seven years, it has transformed from a remote industrial colony to become a busy refugee settlement.

The anti-Muslim riots, sparked off by the death of Hindu pilgrims in the firebombing of a train, led to the death of 1,392 people in five districts, according to official records. NGOs say the toll is closer to 2,000.

Shambolic

The riots also left some 140,000 people homeless. They were put up in camps and given 2,500 rupees by the government - the majority of the displaced were in Ahmedabad city.

Thirty-six-year-old Meraz Ahmad Jalaluddin Ansari is one of them.

He was lucky that he did not lose any relatives in the riots. He and his family fled their home in the Chamanpura area after Hindu neighbours warned them that the rioters were closing in.

But he did lose his home and livelihood.

He had hired a dozen workers and owned 15 sewing machines. He would make, he says, 15,000 to 20,000 rupees a month from embroidery work.

After fleeing the riots and panic-selling his house to a local Hindu neighbour for 275,000 rupees, Mr Ansari moved into Bombay Hotel.

His living standards are shambolic, the markets where he can sell his wares are now 10-12km away, and his children are soon going to lose their neighbourhood municipal school. It will be scrapped to make way for a bus lane.

Mr Ansari has picked up the pieces again, built a new home and managed to buy about five sewing machines to start work.

He can no longer afford to employ people. The government, he says, gave him compensation of 300 rupees for the damage to his house in Chamanpura.

"Once I was fairly well to do. Now I work a lot more and just manage," he says. "Life can't come to a halt. But sometimes I feel we are the living dead."

The riots do not find any echo in the general elections in Gujarat.

Seven years after the incident, both the ruling BJP and Congress party remain silent on the shoddy rehabilitation of the victims or the delay in bringing the culprits to justice.

"We cannot vote for the BJP and the Congress almost has a fixed deposit on our votes. So it's a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea," says Mr Ansari.

There is little talk of the impending polls at Bombay Hotel. When you raise the subject, the residents turn their faces away in disgust.

"Before the 2002 riots, there were just a few houses here. Now there are 15,000 houses and 80,000 people. Muslims have moved in from all over. They feel relatively safe here," says Shabit Ali Ansari, 32, who owns a sweets shop.

"But no party does anything for Muslims. The authorities do nothing for people here unless we raise a storm," he says.

Cynical

Barber shops, groceries, sweets shops and even a photo studio that have sprung up in the grubby lanes do brisk business. But residents work on pitifully low wages.

Riot victims like Noor Banu, 45, and her husband, Ashik Ali Badar Ali, 50, who moved here after their house was attacked in the Saraspur area, are struggling to make ends meet.

Mr Ali used to drive an auto rickshaw and bring home up to 150 rupees a day. Now he earns barely 1,800 rupees a month working as a security guard.

Their three daughters chip in making lacquered bangles to help pay back a loan of 70,000 rupees the family borrowed for the two-room hovel in which they live.

Next door, Asiyana Ahmed Sheikh, 12, makes kites. And Zarin Aslambhai Ghanchi gets less than one US cent for cutting and stitching together a campaign banner for a political party.

"Even the political parties exploit us when giving us jobs. This is the state of affairs here," says Zarin.

Ashik Ali Badar Ali says he is going to vote for the Hindu nationalist BJP, which was blamed for inaction during the rioting.

"The BJP is an open enemy of the Muslims, and the Congress is a hidden enemy. I'd rather vote for the open enemy, so I can go to them for protection."

Muslims comprise barely 10% of the population in Gujarat.

"Despite the riots and the headlines, the political parties here feel that they can ignore them, because they don't comprise a decisive vote bank," says analyst Achyut Yagnik.

Catholics fear Hindu 'Taliban'

By Amanda Hodge

The Australian (27.04.2009) / HRWF (28.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Catholic Church has warned that electoral victory for the conservative Bharatiya Janata Party next month could result in a Hindu-style "Talibanisation" of India and lead to the suppression of human rights for all religious minorities there.

Father Babu Joseph, a spokesman for the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, which represents 168 diocese, said the church feared the results of the current national elections, which are being held in five stages and conclude on May 13.

"They want to demolish secularism - they're very clear there has to be a Hindu nation and only Hinduism is acceptable," Father Joseph told The Australian. "Last time the BJP was in power, they began the process of amending the constitution of India to try and take away the rights of the minorities."

The constitution enshrines the rights of minority groups and religions to establish institutions for their communities.

But Father Joseph said: "If that's removed then tomorrow all our institutions, including our schools, could be taken over."

Communalism has been a constant theme in Indian elections as parties seek to woo voters along religious lines.

One of the most startling moments in an otherwise lacklustre campaign this election was a hate speech delivered by Varun Gandhi, great-grandson of India's founding prime minister and great secularist Jawarhalal Nehru. The young Gandhi was jailed for a fortnight after allegedly telling supporters he would cut off the hands of any Muslims who threatened Hindus.

In August and September last year, the Christian community was targeted in riots across the state of Orissa, triggered by the murder of a local hardline Hindu priest who preached radical Hindu exclusiveness among his followers.

Some 50,000 Christians - many of them converts from the socially backward Dalit caste - have been displaced in the violence, which claimed dozens of lives and saw thousands of Christian houses and churches burnt in villages across the state. Many have left the state but as many as 4000 Christians are still sheltering in refugee camps.

The riots occurred under the coalition state government of the BJP and former political ally the Biju Janata Dal.. But the BJD last month broke off its alliance and has since been trying to persuade people to rebuild their homes and their lives.

Father Joseph said a fraction of Christians displaced in the violence had returned to their villages to rebuild with the help of the Government and the church.

In some, reconciliation had also begun, as Hindus and Christians worked side by side in the reconstruction. But many others had been forcefully converted to Hinduism on their return.

"It's like what is happening in Pakistan - trying to apply sharia law. This is the Hindu version of it," he said, adding that Hindu nationalist parties such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh were indoctrinating poor tribal people in Orissa against Christians.

"This is the worst we have seen so far but we wonder what is still to come depending on what kind of party comes into the centre," Father Joseph said.

However, BJP MP and national party spokesman, Prakash Javadekar, dismissed the church's concerns as "political propaganda", pointing to the success of BJP governments in Christian-dominated states such as Goa.

Mr Javadekar told The Australian yesterday that Indian minorities were safer under a BJP government than under the Congress party, which he said had been responsible in 1984 for inciting India's worst communal violence since independence following the assassination of prime minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards.

Hindu radicals attack old church

Belfast Telegraph (21.04.2009) / HRWF (30.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Armed Hindu radicals attacked a century-old church in India during a service to protest against religious conversions.

The late 19th century church, which comes under the Church of Scotland Missions, is situated barely half-a-mile from the nearest police station in Saoner, in the state of Maharashtra.

Rev Mark Sakharpekar had just begun his sermon when the men attacked, triggering panic among the worshippers.

A trident was hurled at Mr Sakharpekar, but he escaped unhurt. Two women received minor injuries.

Mr Sakharpekar said: "It was a merciless attack. I was shocked to see them barge into the church with sticks and weapons during the worship. They hurled a sharp trident at me.

"Some of them were known faces. One Pandit Bharadwaj even brandished a pistol to intimidate me."

Saoner police told the Times of India that about 10 minutes before the attack, a few people claiming to belong to a unit from radical Hindu group Vishwa Hindu Parishad came to the police station.

They had handed over an application asking for action to be taken against religious conversions in Saoner. The group also warned of a strong movement against the church's action of allegedly targeting economically weaker sections and converting them to Christianity through enticements.

Religious rift tears at Orissa communities

BBC (13.04.2009) / HRWF (16.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Hundreds of people have gathered in the darkness in the town of Raikia. Candlelight flickers across their faces as they sit quietly on the floor. They chant and pray as a priest leads them in worship.

For Christians, Easter is a time of hope. But in Kandhamal, deep in the interior in the eastern Indian state of Orissa, hope is in short supply.

This is a community still traumatised by a sudden burst of violence last year, described as the worst anti-Christian rioting in India since independence.

Dozens of people were killed, and hundreds of churches and houses were damaged or destroyed.

Tiny shacks

Utsva and Minati Digal have come to celebrate midnight Mass in Raikia, where the parish church still stands.

Last year they were burnt out of their home. Their local church was left in ruins. Prayer, they say, is all they have left.

An hour's walk down the road, they now live with 11 other families in a field. The whole group lives in a single tent, next to a collection of tiny shacks made of wood and plastic sheeting.

Utsva and Minati say no-one will employ Christians as day labourers any more, and the children cannot go to school.

"We are having a very hard time living here," Utsva says.

"We have no protection and there is a sense of fear that at any time someone can attack us. So we try to sleep in the day and take turns to guard our place at night."

Minati also complains that they have not had enough help from the government, and they do not have enough rice to feed everyone properly.

"There are too many of us," she says, as her daughter tugs at the hem of her sari.

"Now we just want to go to any place where we can get our life back. Here we are constantly threatened and targeted."

Thousands of Kandhamal's Christians are still living a makeshift life, and their former neighbours are refusing to let them go back to their homes.

Only if they renounce their faith, convert to Hinduism, and drop charges against anyone allegedly involved in last year's pogrom will they be allowed to return.

In one village Hindus have been told that anyone even talking to the Christians would be fined more than 1,000 rupees (\$20; £14).

We went looking for Hindu villagers, and found a small election rally for the Hindu nationalist party, the BJP.

Orissa goes to the polls in the first round of India's general elections on Thursday.

'Dignity'

We followed the BJP candidate, Ashok Sahu, to another tiny hamlet, past the ruins of another broken, abandoned church.

But it is the Hindus, Mr Sahu insists, who face discrimination. Hundreds have been arrested, he says, since last year's riots.

"I don't justify violence, but there are two types of violence," he explains. "One is planned violence and the other is spontaneous violence."

"A maximum number of Christians were killed, yes it is a fact, but why? The Hindu sense of dignity has come to the surface in a spontaneous manner and they want to protect that sense of dignity."

Ashok Sahu is now facing charges for inciting hatred against Christians in one of his campaign speeches. He insists that he is the victim of a political conspiracy.

"If I'm arrested," he warns, "a volcano will erupt."

Two days after issuing his warning, Mr Sahu was taken into custody by Orissa police.

Divisions

All of which is not much comfort to another 43 Christian families who are camped out in a market on the edge of the town of G Udayagiri.

On market days, they are simply pushed with their belongings into a corner.

More than eight months after violent rioting shook this district, there is little prospect that political change will make things any better.

"There are peace committees," says Praful Mallick, one of the men living in the market.

"But the peace committees are full of the people who led the riots. What difference is that going to make?"

A local priest, Father Ajay Singh, says: "In this place where we are sitting presently, you can see they have been neglected by the administration and the public, nobody bothers about it.

"People are divided along caste lines and religious lines, and this election will only make the situation worse."

The plight of Kandhamal's Christians has received international attention. And yet they are still living in a state of great uncertainty.

The roots of the violence here are complex - last year's pogrom broke out after the murder of a local Hindu leader.

But many Christians have simply fled from this region altogether, and there are signs that Hindu activists would like to force the rest to leave as well.

In this election season, Kandhamal remains a test of India's commitment to secular politics, and religious freedom.

Court backs expulsion of Muslim pupil over beard

By Shaikh Azizur Rahman, Foreign Correspondent

The National (01.04.2009) / HRWF (06.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Supreme Court ruling that dismissed a Muslim boy's case against his school after he had been expelled for wearing a beard, saying it would not allow the "Talibanisation" of the country, has drawn mixed reactions from Indian Muslims.

Justice Markandeya Katju, a member of the Supreme Court bench that delivered the verdict on Monday, said: "We don't want to have Taliban in the country. Tomorrow a girl student may come and say that she wants to wear a burqa [in the school] - can we allow that?"

While students and teachers supported the verdict, others detected Islamophobia in Mr Katju's comparisons to the Taliban.

Aziz Mubarak, a Muslim community leader in Kolkata, said the judge's comments were "unpleasant and painful".

"If growing a beard is akin to being a Taliban then I would like to ask, were Rabindranath Tagore, Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln, and more recently, our prime minister, Manmohan Singh, and [Hindu extremist leader] Bal Thackeray also terrorists?" Mohammad Salim, 16, a former Grade 10 student at Nirmala Convent Higher Secondary School in the Bidisha district of Madhya Pradesh, was expelled in December when he refused to obey orders to shave off his beard. Being clean-shaven is mandatory for all students at the school.

The boy's family filed a petition in Madhya Pradesh's highest court, which ruled in favour of the school. They then brought their case before the Supreme Court in New Delhi this month.

Mr B A Khan, Salim's lawyer, contended in his petition to the Supreme Court that the Indian constitution guarantees all citizens the right to pursue their religious practices and the right to keep a beard was a fundamental part of a Muslim's religion.

Any regulation making it mandatory for a Muslim student to shave his beard violated this provision, he said, urging the court to quash the school rule and order the school to take Salim back.

Salim's petition also said the school allowed Sikh students to have beards and wear turbans but, in his case, had insisted that he either be clean-shaven or leave. This was clearly discriminatory, Mr Khan argued.

Mr Katju said an individual's religious beliefs should be respected but within reason. "I am a secularist to the core. We should strike a balance between rights and personal beliefs. We cannot overstretch secularism either," he said. The Supreme Court also said religious minority institutions, like Nirmala Convent school, which is Christian, should have the right to have their own sets of rules as outlined in the constitution.

However, Monday's ruling is not the first time a Muslim has been turned down in moving to be allowed to wear a beard in an institution where doing so is forbidden.

Last year, the Punjab and Haryana High Court turned down a plea by a Muslim Indian air force serviceman for the right to grow a beard. In a letter to the court the IAF had said only Sikhs were allowed to grow beards in the air force and Muslims were forbidden since the "practice" is "not universally recognised in Islam" as a religious duty. "Growing beards can be at the most said to be a personal choice, but the same is not a compulsive requirement of a person professing Islam. Even if it is presumed to be so, it

can be regulated, restricted, if public order, morality and health so requires," the high court ruling said.

Several Muslim leaders expressed concern over the way the Supreme Court worded its verdict, equating bearded Muslims with members of the Taliban. Mumbai-based journalist Hasan Kamaal said few would agree with Mr Katju's view that every Muslim who keeps a beard supports the Taliban or extremism. "Several non-Muslims also sport beards. The beard is not a sign of orthodoxy, extremism or fanaticism. The remark of Justice Katju, hinting that all bearded men are Talibans, is absolutely unjustified and discriminatory."

Zafarul Islam Khan, president of the All India Muslim Majlis-e Mushawarat, an umbrella body of Indian Muslim organisations, said the sentiment of Mr Katju's remarks contravened basic human rights.

"This bizarre and uncalled for opinion flies in the face of the religious, civil and human rights of every Indian citizen guaranteed by our constitution. A Muslim's request to be allowed to grow beard cannot be equated as 'Talibanisation' of the country," Mr Khan said in a statement yesterday.

"It is very unfortunate that a Supreme Court judge should nurse such biased and communal ideas and hide behind his claim that he is "a secularist to the core."

Recent incidents of persecution

By Mahruaii Sailo

Compass Direct News (31.03.2009) / HRWF (01.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Hindu extremists from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or World Hindu Council) on March 21 attacked Bible students and staff members of the Believers Church and demanded 10,000 rupees (US\$193) from them in Udaipur. A church source said the Christians were distributing gospel tracts in a Jeep when the extremists stopped them and dragged the driver out. Commandeering the vehicle, the Hindu extremists drove toward a remote area and beat the Christians, tearing up their gospel tracts. The church representative told Compass some Christians sustained minor injuries. The Christians later reached an agreement with the extremists without bowing to their demands to cease evangelistic activity.

Kerala - About 10 Hindu hardliners from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on March 15 attacked an evangelist in Malapuram. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that the extremists pulled away Tribal Mission evangelist O.J. Andrews as he was leading a worship service, dragged him about 30 kilometers (19 miles) in the street and beat him. The extremists had earlier accused the pastor of forceful conversion in a poster they had pasted on a wall, a charge he denied. Andrews filed a police complaint in Nilampur police station, but Sub-Inspector Ommer, who goes by one name, told Compass that the evangelist agreed to withdraw the charge after the extremists agreed to live peaceably with Christians. Police gave the hard-line BJP members a stern warning not to disturb the Christians again.

Punjab - Hindu extremists from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh on March 15 accused a pastor of trying to convert people to Christianity by offering them money and seriously injured another Christian in Ludhiana. A source told Compass that at about 4 p.m. on the previous day, a pastor identified only as Tiwari and other Christians were distributing gospel tracts when a group of Hindu extremists attacked them. They beat six Christians in all, including women, all of whom sustained minor injuries. The next day, about 200

area extremists massed and removed a cross, pictures and gospel literature and burned them in a fire as they danced around it. They beat Christians present, seriously injuring Ayub Masih. Police arrived, and each party filed complaints against the other. Superintendent of Police Harbinder Singh told Compass that about 20 police officers are posted in the area and that officials were trying to arrange a peace agreement between the two parties.

Himachal Pradesh – Gospel for Asia (GFA) reported that Hindu extremists beat two Christian missionaries on March 14 in an undisclosed village in Himachal Pradesh. A mob of about 30 Hindu hardliners beat and kicked GFA missionaries Murari Jay and Atul Rajesh, leaving Jay with severe injuries to his back and Rajesh with acute head trauma. GFA representative Sushant Sona told Compass that, besides beating the Christians, the intolerant Hindus stormed into their home and burned their belongings. At about 6:30 p.m. the extremists took the Christians to the police station, and officers took them into custody allegedly as a security measure. They were released at about 11:30 p.m. The assailants reached an agreement by which they agreed not to attack the Christians again if the Christians agreed to drop charges.

Madhya Pradesh – Hindu extremists on March 12 splashed gas on the house of a pastor in Nainpur, Mandala and set it aflame. A source said the extremists burned the house of pastor James Masih of St. Mark Church at midnight, damaging doors, windows, curtains, files and furniture. Pastor Masih told Compass that local people opposed his congregation because of their Christian activities. The pastor filed a police complaint at Nainpur police station, but no arrests had been made at press time.

Radical Hindu leader killed. Tension in Orissa

by Nirmala Carvalho

AsiaNews (19.03.2009) / HRWF (20.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Prabhat Panigrahi, a radical Hindu leader previously arrested for the violence against Christians in Orissa, was killed this morning by an armed group in the district of Kandhamal.

The police say that about 15 ultras - who were probably Maoists - entered the village of Rudiguma, 145 kilometers from Phulbani, and opened fire on the 30-year-old Panigrahi, a guest at the home of an activist of the nationalist Hindu organization RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh).

Panigrahi had been arrested for involvement in the violence against Christians in the district of Kandhamal, which erupted at the end of last August after the violent death of Laxamananda Saraswati, the leader of a fanatical Hindu group, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). He was released last March 14 from the prison of Baliguda.

Sajan K. George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians, tells AsiaNews that "Panigrahi was very involved in the riots and a known baiter of the vulnerable Christian people, and now the situation in Kandhamal, which was already tense with sporadic killings of Christians, will bring renewed fear. Moreover, there are serious anxieties in the runup to the general elections." Many analysts say that one of the motives in the pogrom was to disrupt the Christian electorate by driving them out of the region, in an effort to guarantee victory for the BJP, supported by radical Hindu groups.

Sajan K. George explains that there is still no peace for the Christians: "Our people are not even being allowed to collect the seasonal 'Mahua' flowers this season, these flowers which have traditionally been collected and sold to make local brew, found in abundance

in the forests of Kandhamal. For years, they have been a source of livelihood for the villagers. However, this time even this is being denied to them, besides, they are not allowed to collect firewood. How will they survive?"

Sr. Sujith of the Missionaries of Charity recounts the other difficulties and forms of marginalization suffered by the faithful: "In many places, people are being given the first phase of compensation and told to leave the relief camps. Once the people leave, their names are struck from the rolls of the relief camps, and they cannot return. But our people are not allowed to enter the village as Christian, they have to become Hindu, so they have no alternative but to live under tarpaulin tents in groups in the outskirts of the villages, or live in shanties in the marketplaces, or become a displaced people, leaving the district or even state."

Pastor shot in bomb attack on Church in India

Attacker said he aimed to stop Christian conversions; Hindu extremist connection suspected

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (10.03.2009) / HRWF (11.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - In an effort to stop conversions to Christianity in the eastern state of Bihar, a 25-year-old ailing man on Sunday (March 8) exploded a crude bomb in a church and shot the pastor.

Police Inspector Hari Krishna Mandal told Compass that the attacker, Rajesh Singh, had come fully prepared to kill the pastor, Vinod Kumar, in Baraw village in the Nasriganj area of Rohtas district, and then take his own life.

"However," Mandal said, "believers caught him before he could do more damage or kill himself."

The 35-year-old pastor was taken to a hospital in nearby Varanasi, in the neighboring state of Uttar Pradesh and at press time was out of danger of losing his life, according to a leader of Gospel Echoing Missionary Society (GEMS) who requested anonymity.

The church, Prarthana Bhawan (House of Prayer), belongs to GEMS. Around 30 people were in the church when the attack took place. Some women in the church sustained burns in the blast.

"Rajesh Singh threw a crude bomb from the window of the church, and the sound of the explosion created a chaos in the congregation," said Inspector Mandal. As members of the church began to run out, he added, Singh came into the building and shot the pastor with a handmade pistol from point-blank range.

Singh had more bombs to explode and three more bullets in his pistol, but church members caught hold of him and handed him over to police, the inspector said.

"In his statement, Singh said he was personally against Christian conversions and wanted to kill the pastor to stop conversions," Mandal said. "He wanted to take his own life after killing the pastor, and this is why he had more bullets in his pistol and an overdose of anesthesia in a syringe."

Asked if Singh had any links with extremist Hindu nationalist groups, the inspector said no such organization was active in the area, though local Christians say Hindu extremist presence has increased recently. The GEMS source said people allegedly linked with a Hindu nationalist group had sent a threatening letter to the pastor, asking him to stop preaching in the area.

The source said the incident could have been fallout from conversions in nearby Mithnipur village, where a Hindu family had received Christ after being healed from a mental illness around six months ago. Singh also lives in Mithnipur.

"Pastor Kumar had not been visiting the village, fearing opposition from the villagers who were not happy with the conversion of this family," the GEMS source said. "The same church's cross had also been damaged about a year ago by unidentified people."

The source said he believes that although Singh's affiliation or linkage with a Hindu nationalist group has not been established, it is likely that he was instigated to kill the pastor by an extremist group. Pastor Kumar, married with three children, has been working in Rohtas district for the last 12 years.

Local Christians complain that the presence of the Hindu extremist Sangh Parivar (a family of organizations linked with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or RSS, India's chief Hindu nationalist group) has recently increased in the area. They say the Hindu nationalist conglomerate has been spewing hate against Christians for more than 10 years, accusing them of using monetary incentives and fraudulent means and foreign money to convert Hindus.

The attacker has an amputated hand and was said to be mentally disturbed since 1996, when he was diagnosed with cancer, Inspector Mandal said.

"According to the villagers," he said, "Singh had been mentally disturbed ever since he was diagnosed with cancer, and later tuberculosis, although there is no medical report to substantiate this."

The government of Bihar is ruled by a coalition of a regional party, the Janata Dal-United (JD-U) party, and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The JD-U is also part of the National Democratic Alliance, the main opposition coalition at the federal level led by the BJP. The JD-U, however, is not perceived as a supporter of Hindu nationalism.

Of the 82 million people, mostly Hindu, in Bihar, only 53,137 are Christian, according to the 2001 census.

'Anti-Conversion' Law considered in Karnataka, India

Legislation leading to anti-Christian attacks said to be planned in violence-ridden state

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (02.03.2009) / HRWF (03.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Hindu nationalist government in the southern state of Karnataka, which recorded the second highest number of attacks on Christians last year, is planning to introduce the kind of "anti-conversion" law that has provided the pretext for anti-Christian violence in other states.

Such laws are designed to thwart forcible or fraudulent conversion, but they are popularly misunderstood as criminalizing conversion in general. Comments from public

officials sometimes heighten this misconception: India's constitution provides for freedom of religion, but Karnataka Minister for Law, Justice and Human Rights S. Suresh Kumar said in the Feb. 22 edition of a Hindu extremist publication that the state's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government "is set to frame an anti-conversion law, as innocent Hindus are getting converted to other religions."

"Poor and uneducated Hindus are becoming victims of false propaganda against Hinduism, and our government is planning to enact a law after studying the similar anti-conversion acts/anti-conversion bills of various states," the BJP minister said in the *Organiser*, official publication of the Hindu extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP's ideological mentor.

Anti-conversion laws are in force in five states – Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat – and its implementation is awaited in the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Rajasthan. Cynically named "Freedom of Religion Acts," the laws seek to curb religious conversions made by "force, fraud or allurement," but human rights groups say they obstruct conversion generally as Hindu nationalists invoke them to harass Christians with spurious arrests and incarcerations. Numerous cases against Christians have been filed under various anti-conversion laws, mainly in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Orissa, but no one has been convicted in the more than four decades since such laws were enacted.

Dr. Sajan K. George, national president of the Karnataka-based Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC), expressed anguish over reported plans to introduce a law that has a history of misuse by extreme Hindu nationalists. He also indicated his concern at the government's slackness in prosecuting those who have attacked Christians.

"Unfortunately, 2008 saw the worst kind of regression in our society as the church in India experienced a wave of violence and persecution unprecedented since the origin of Christianity in India 2,000 years ago," George said, referring to a sudden rise in anti-Christian attacks in several Indian states, mainly Karnataka and the eastern state of Orissa, in the latter part of last year.

With the BJP forming a government of its own last year, fears within the Christian community that persecution would increase came true, he said.

"Karnataka recorded at least 112 anti-Christian attacks across 29 districts in 2008," and at least 10 more such incidents have been reported this year, said George. Christians number slightly more than 1 million of Karnataka's 52.8-million population.

Among the more tense districts in Karnataka are Mangalore, Bangalore and Davangere, according to George. The districts of Chikmagalur, Chitradurga, Belgaum, Tumkur, Udupi, Shimoga, Dharwad and Kodagu are also potentially volatile, he said. The GCIC reported that on Jan. 11 unidentified extreme Hindu nationalists barged into the home of a Christian convert in Amrthmahal Kavalu area near Tiptur town in Karnataka's Tumkur district, verbally abused the four Christians there and burned their Bibles. The nine hard-line Hindus threatened to burn down the house if the Christians continued to worship at the Calvary Gospel Centre.

Besides legitimizing anti-Christian violence in the popular mind, critics say anti-conversion laws make conversion cumbersome and identify targets for Hindu extremists. In Gujarat state, the archbishop of Gandhinagar, Rev. Stanislaus Fernandes, and non-profit organizations have filed a petition in the state high court challenging a requirement in Gujarat's anti-conversion law that co-religionists obtain prior permission from a district magistrate before performing or participating in a conversion ceremony. The *Times of India* reported on Friday (Feb. 27) that Justice M.S. Shah and Justice Akil Kureshi have

accepted the case and issued a notice to the state government seeking explanation on objections raised by petitioners.

"The Act, by making one's conversion a matter of public notice and knowledge, really aims at facilitating and encouraging the religious fanatics to take law into their hands to prevent even free and voluntary conversion," petitioner attorneys contended. "In the name of maintaining law and order, the Act will invite people to disturb law and order." Counsel added that the Act aims mainly at "preventing Dalits and adivasis [tribal people] from converting to another religion, thereby forcing them to remain in the Hindu fold."

Orissa Fallout

A fresh spate of attacks hit Karnataka last September following India's worst-ever wave of persecution in the eastern state of Orissa, where at least 127 people were killed and 315 villages, 4,640 houses, 252 churches and 13 educational institutions were destroyed. The Orissa attacks, allegedly incited by the BJP and the Hindu extremist Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council or VHP) under the pretext of avenging the assassination of Hindu nationalist leader Laxmanananda Saraswati in Kandhamal district, also rendered more than 50,000 people homeless. Although an extreme Marxist group claimed responsibility for Saraswati's murder, the VHP and the BJP, which is part of the ruling coalition in Orissa, blamed Christians for it.

Even as the mayhem in Orissa was underway, VHP's youth wing Bajrang Dal began attacks on Christians and their institutions in Karnataka on the pretext of protesting alleged distribution by the New Life Fellowship organization of a book said to denigrate Hindu gods. According to Dr. John Dayal, member of the National Integration Council of the Government of India, last September at least 33 churches were attacked and 53 Christians were injured, mainly in the Mangalore region of Dakshina Kannada district and parts of Udupi district.

The state convener for the Bajrang Dal, Mahendra Kumar, publicly claimed responsibility for the attacks and was arrested on Sept. 19, a day after the federal government ruled by the Congress party-led United Progressive Alliance admonished the state government for allowing attacks on Christians, according to The Deccan Herald, a regional daily. Kumar, however, was subsequently released on bail.

While the issue of the "objectionable" book served as the pretext for the attacks, the BJP had already become upset with New Life Fellowship because a film actress known as Nagma announced in July 2008 that she had become Christian a few years prior. BJP attorneys sent her a threatening legal notice for "hurting religious sentiments."

In a press conference at Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu state on July 24, the general secretary of the BJP's legal wing, Sridhar Murthi, said that Nagma – who appeared in several Tamil-, Telugu- and Hindi-language films from 1993 to 1997 – had hurt the sentiments of others while speaking at a Christian meeting in Nalumavadi, in the Tuticorin area.

"In that meeting, she said she is ready to preach the gospel in every city and town that the Lord takes her to," reported The Christian Messenger, a Christian news website based in Tamil Nadu state. New Life Fellowship later reportedly ordained Nagma as a minister.

Following the attacks – not only on New Life Church but also on churches and individuals from various denominations – the BJP government set up the Justice B.K. Somasekhara Commission of Inquiry to investigate. Churches and Christians had filed 458 affidavits from Dakshina Kannada district. After questioning 49 witnesses, the panel completed its five-day judicial proceeding in Mangalore on Feb. 20 and set the next sitting for March 16-20. The Commission earlier had a sitting in Bangalore, capital of Karnataka.

Karnataka also has gained recent notoriety for violent vigilantes. Last month a splinter group from the extreme Hindu nationalist VHP, the Sri Ram Sene, attacked women in a pub in Mangalore, saying only men were allowed to drink.

"These girls come from all over India, drink, smoke, and walk around in the night spoiling the traditional girls of Mangalore," Pravin Valke, founding member of the Sri Rama Sene, told The Indian Express on Feb. 3. "Why should girls go to pubs? Are they going to serve their future husbands alcohol? Should they not be learning to make chapattis [Indian bread]? Bars and pubs should be for men only. We wanted to ensure that all women in Mangalore are home by 7 p.m."

With national elections expected to be held in April-May this year, Christians fear that attacks could continue. Dr. Bokanakere Siddalingappa Yeddyurappa, the 66-year-old chief minister of Karnataka, has been part of the RSS since 1970.

India briefs: recent incidents of persecution

By Mahruaii Silo and Nirmala Carvalho

Compass Direct (27.02.2009) / HRWF (28.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Police on Feb. 25 arrested the Rev. Venkata Rao Paulose in connection with the sale of a book said to hurt the religious feelings of Hindus; the book was sold near a Christian conference Rev. Paulose organized in January in Sanjay Nagar Colony, Anuppur district. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that Rev. Paulose, founder of Pine Mount English Medium School, was directing the conference at the school on Jan. 16-18 while, unknown to him, two persons were selling books near the school compound. Hindu extremists from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Bajrang Dal purchased copies of a book, "Secularism and Hindutva" by M.G. Matthew, and took it to the Chachai police station. There they filed a complaint against Rev. Paulose, pastor of Pentecostal Church of God. At 1 a.m. on Jan. 19, police ordered the pastor to the police station, where he gave a statement saying he didn't know who was selling books near the conference site; he was reprimanded and released. On Feb. 19, police arrested pastors Kailash Mashih and Sharda Prasad Muthel in Anuppur in connection with the complaint about the book and took them to the Chachai police station. Investigating Officer D.S. Divedi told Compass that the pastors were arrested under Section 295(A) of the Indian Penal Code for "deliberate and malicious acts to outrage religious feelings." One of the pastors (undisclosed) was put in Shadol district jail, and the other was freed on bail. On Feb. 25, police for unknown reasons again arrested Rev. Paulose in connection with the complaint about the book. An Anuppur district court judge refused to grant him bail, and at press time the pastor of the 150-member church was in jail at the Chachai police station.

Karnataka - Police on Feb. 24 detained two Christian women in Chickmagalur after Hindu extremists filed a complaint of forcible conversion based solely on the women welcoming two new converts into their home. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that the Hindu extremists saw a recent convert to Christianity identified only as Panamma and her daughter visit the home of Christians identified only as Sangamma and K.P. Mary. The Hindu nationalists filed the complaint against Mary and Sangamma at N.R. Pura police station, and the Christian women were in police custody for about two hours. A station officer who goes by only one name, Revannea, told Compass that an inquiry was made into the matter and the two women were released without charges after a warning not to undertake further evangelism.

Chhattisgarh - Hindu extremists on Feb. 23 disrupted a prayer service in Ambikapur, accused the pastors of forceful conversion, beat them and damaged motorcycles. A

Compass contact said pastor Joseph Toppa was leading the prayer meeting at the house of Parmeshwar Lakda when the Hindu extremists barged in at about 7 p.m. The extremists belonged to the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarhi Parishad (student wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party), Dharm Sena (Religious Army) and Dharm Jagran Manch (Religious Awakening Forum), all affiliated with the Hindu extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Police arrived and, as is customary in India, arrested the victims; officers took about 30 Christians to the police station. Local Christian leaders intervened, and the Christians were released at about 11:30 p.m. after giving their statements. There were no serious injuries.

Andhra Pradesh – On Feb. 22 Hindu extremists led by a village leader barged into the Sunday worship meeting of a church in Ranga Reddy, attacked a pastor and demanded that he turn the property over to them. Led by village head Rokalbanda Ramulu, the intolerant Hindus arrived at about 11 a.m. and beat the pastor, tearing his shirt. About six policemen arrived at the spot and brought the situation under control. Pastor K. Krupanamdham of True Wine Church filed a police complaint. Two officers have been posted to protect the church, but no First Information Report was filed.

Chhattisgarh – Police on Feb. 17 arrested 11 pastors from the Believers Church in Sarguja under Chhattisgarh's anti-conversion law after Hindu extremists stormed into their revival meeting and beat them. The Evangelical Fellowship of India reported that Hindu extremists led by the local legislative assembly member from the Hindu extremist Bharatiya Janata Party, Renuka Singh, arrived at about 7 p.m. and attacked the pastors, tore Bibles and banners and damaged the sound system. The pastors were bruised but reported no serious injuries. The Christians were conducting the meeting with prior permission of the police and the civil administration. Police intervened at about 11 p.m. after persistent calls from local Christian leaders. As is customary in India, authorities took the victims of the violence to the police station "for security measures" but ended up filing charges against them under unsubstantiated claims of forceful conversion. The pastors were released on bail on Feb. 18.

Andhra Pradesh – Hindu extremists on Feb. 14 attacked a Christian media team, accused them of forceful conversion and threatened to kill them in Kawadipally, Ranga Reddy district. Moses Vatipalli of the All Indian Christian Council told Compass that three Christians identified as K. Anand Kumar, Mudi Jacob and Swami Das were distributing gospel tracts when about 15 Hindu hardliners attacked them. The intolerant Hindus assaulted the Christians, tore the remaining gospel tracts, damaged their vehicle and threatened to kill them if they did not leave the village immediately. The Christians were badly bruised but reported no serious injuries. A complaint was filed at Hayath Nagar police station, but no arrests had been made at press time.

Karnataka – Hindu extremists on Feb. 3 burned a Christian's house and threatened to build a Hindu temple on his land in Tumpur. According to a local source, about 15 extremists went to the house of the Christian, identified only as Dasappa, on Feb. 1 and insisted that the area member of the legislative assembly was asking for the site for a Hindu temple. Dasappa refused, saying that the land was legally owned by his son, and the extremists asserted that there was no place for Christians in the area. On Feb. 3, the Hindu extremists went to his house again, splashed gas on it and burned it to ashes. Local Christian leaders filed a complaint, but police refused to register a case.

Karnataka – A group of Hindu extremists from the Bajrang Dal on Feb. 2 attacked a Christian truck driver in the Deralakatte area on the outskirts of the Mangalore. The Hindu newspaper reported that the extremists beat Albert D'Souza, 48, with iron rods after he found them breaking the windshield of his Jeep and marring the Christian stickers on it. D'Souza was brought to a city hospital in critical condition, the report stated. Konaje police registered a case, saying the attack was communally motivated, and arrested three of the five persons believed to be responsible for the assault.

Karnataka – Police on Jan. 27 arrested a pastor in Bangalore for alleged fraudulent conversion after Hindu extremists who assaulted him filed charges. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that about 30 Hindu extremists led by Shiva Rame barged into the house of pastor G. Kiran Kumar of Bethesda Church and accused him of trying to convert children by luring them with free tuition and asserting that he had insulted Hindu deities. The extremists assaulted the pastor and his father and dragged them to the Vidyaranyapura police station. Surrounding the police station, they bullied officers into arresting the Christians, with pastor Kumar charged under sections 503 and 153(A) of the Indian Penal Code for “criminal intimidation” and “promoting enmity between groups on grounds of religion” respectively. The pastor was released on bail on Jan. 31.

Karnataka – Hindu extremists on Jan. 27 accused a pastor of conversion by allurements in Belgaum because he offered light refreshments at his house church on Christmas Day. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that when the intolerant Hindus heard that pastor Tanaya Sunder Nayak served the refreshments at a prayer meeting of his house church last Christmas, they filed the complaint and manipulated police into going on a hunt for him. Arrest warrant in hand, police went to the pastor’s house while he was away. Umesh Pangam, area additional superintendent of police, told Compass that after an inquiry police realized there was no basis for the charges and dropped the case.

Assam – A mob of about 600 Hindu extremists from the Kamalabari-Sattara Establishment assaulted Christians on Jan. 24 in Majuli Island, Jorhat. The Indian Catholic reported that about 400 believers from St. Anthony’s church in Mariani had gone to Majuli Island for an ordination ceremony. Shouting anti-Christian slogans, the Hindu extremists stopped the Christians as they were en route home, accused them of forcible conversion and threatened to cut them to pieces, according to the newspaper. The Hindu mob asserted that Christians should never enter their area, where a temple affiliated with the Hindu extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is located. The violent mob kicked and punched the Christians, including women and children. Pulling the Christians’ ears, they forced them to walk barefoot to Ferry Ghat five kilometers (nearly three miles) away. Civil administration officials intervened after a priest informed them of the incident and arranged transportation to assist the Christians home. Alan Brooks, spokesman of the Assam Christian Forum, told Compass that Christians filed a First Information Report in Kamalabari and Jarmukh police stations, but no arrests were made.

Kerala – Hindu extremists from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh on Jan. 22 assaulted a pastor and beat him till he fell unconscious in Vaithiry. According to the Evangelical Fellowship of India, pastor T.T. Abraham of the Brethren Assembly Church was distributing gospel tracts when three intolerant Hindus stopped him. In the assault the pastor suffered serious injuries on his neck, stomach and back. The Hindu extremists fled the scene when they saw an approaching auto-rickshaw, and the driver took the pastor to a government hospital. No police complaint was filed, as the pastor said he chose to forgive the extremists.

Christian father of two murdered in Orissa

Nephew, mother suspect Hindu hardliners shouting anti-Christian threats that morning

By Shireen Bhatia

Compass Direct (25.02.2009) / HRWF (26.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Family members of a Christian found murdered last week in the

Pandagadu area of Orissa state's Kandhamal district said they believe the killers were Hindu nationalists such as those responsible for more than two months of violent anti-Christian rioting last year.

Hrudayananda Nayak, a 42-year-old father of two, was found dead on Thursday (Feb. 19) with several injuries to his head sustained as he took a shortcut through a forest to his home village of Rudangia, two kilometers from Pandagadu and five kilometers from G. Udayagiri.

His mother, Prasanna Kumari Nayak, has submitted a written complaint to police alleging the killers were associated with Hindu hardliners involved in last year's rioting. His nephew Sujan Nayak, a lawyer and resident of Rudangia who saw the victim's body, said that his uncle appeared to have undergone a fatal beating.

Sujan Nayak told Compass that on the day of Hrudayananda Nayak's death, Feb. 18, his uncle told him before leaving home that he had received threats from three drunken men who were standing outside shouting threats at Christians in general that morning.

"He quoted them as saying, 'We will not burn houses this time but will kill all Christians one by one,'" Sujan Nayak said.

Describing the injuries on his uncle's body, Nayak told Compass there were wounds on his forehead, a severe wound on the left side of his head near the ear, as well as injuries to the back of his head and "marks around his neck." He added that a blood-stained towel and flashlight battery were found near the body.

"From the battery and the injuries on his head it is evident that a huge torch was used for hitting him, and the mark on the neck shows that the towel was put around his neck to drag him," he said.

There is reason to suspect the men who had threatened anti-Christian violence, he said. "The three men threatening violence in the morning were seen on the same road passing through the forest where Hrudayananda was murdered at 11 at night on the date of the murder," Nayak said, adding that the three suspects have absconded. "It is one week since the murder, and the suspects have not returned back home."

He said that the victim's mother also witnessed the threats that her son and others received the morning of the murder, "but due to fear of revenge from them she did not reveal this to the police."

District Superintendent of Police S. Praveen Kumar reportedly said it is not clear that the murder was related to last year's anti-Christian rioting.

"I am not sure if his death has anything to do with the communal violence," he told media. "Our investigation is on. Somebody may have hit him on the head, causing his death."

The killing is the third such murder since October 2008, when the more than two months of large-scale, anti-Christian violence that began in August officially came to an end.

Missing

Sujan Nayak said that his uncle left home in Rudangia for a market at G. Udayagiri on the afternoon of Feb. 18.

On his way back, Hrudayananda Nayak took a vehicle from G. Udayagiri as far as Gressgia village, from which he took a shorter route to Rudangia, crossing the forest by

foot. It was around 7 in the evening. He had covered a distance of two kilometers and reached an isolated part of Pandagadu when he was attacked.

When he did not return home as expected that day, the following day villagers went searching for him in different directions. Around half a kilometer from the site of the murder is a school, and students there informed the search team of a blood-stained slipper lying near the school grounds.

The victim's mother identified the slippers as belonging to her son, Hrudayananda Nayak. A rigorous search began around the area, and soon they noticed blood spots on a path leading up a hill. Reaching the top of the hill, between two huge rocks forming a cave shape they found Nayak's body.

"His shirt and pants were taken off and kept aside, which means they had intentions of burning the body," said Sujan Nayak. He explained that it is normal practice in the area to remove clothes on a body to be burned to reduce the time necessary for cremation.

Police were immediately informed, he said, adding, "Sniffer dogs were brought who led them to the lane of the house that belongs to one of the men who screamed threats the other morning, and then to a pond located in the same area used for bathing."

Police suspect the killers had washed in the pond after committing the crime, Sujan Nayak said.

The house of the suspect to which the dogs led police is about 200 kilometers (124 miles) from the house of the victim.

According to Sujan Nayak, even after the dogs traced the lane where one suspect lives, police have been slow to proceed with the case.

Hrudayananda Nayak is survived by his 35-year-old wife, Reena Nayak, a 10-year-old daughter and a 7-year-old son.

Orissa violence continues, another Christian killed

by Nirmala Carvalho

AsiaNews (20.02.2009) / HRWF (21.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Another Christian has been killed in the State of Orissa. The lifeless body of Hrudayananda Nayak was found yesterday in the forest near the village of Rudangia, near Ghumusar Udayagiri, a city in the district of Kandhamal. The 40-year-old man had disappeared the day before.

Sajan George, national president of the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC), told AsiaNews that after Nayak accompanied his sister to a place five kilometres from the city he was stopped on his way back by a group of Hindu extremists and vanished thereafter.

Yesterday afternoon around 4 pm some Christian residents from local villages walking along the path Nayak had taken saw some blood and a slipper in a roadside bush.

Aware that a man had disappeared they informed police who came to investigate.

After a brief search by police and the Christians, Nayak's body was found, lifeless.

Rudangia is a predominantly Christian village, some 260 kilometres from the State capital of Bhubaneswar

Rudangia was the scene of a lot of violence and was virtually under siege at the height of the campaign of persecution against Christians in Orissa in August and September of last year.

On 30 September a mob of some 3,000 people was able to storm the village, torching houses and the local church.

A Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) platoon was dispatched to the village which was turned into a fortress. Christian residents have not dared leave it for fear of attacks.

Despite tight security measures violence has not ebbed in the area. Nayak's death is the third such incident since 30 October.

Hard-line Hindus still forcing conversions in Orissa

'Convert or die' threats prevent Christian families from returning to home villages

By Shireen Bhatia

Compass Direct (18.02.2009) / HRWF (19.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - In the wake of anti-Christian violence in Orissa state last year, hard-line Hindus in Kandhamal district have forced nearly half of 40 Christian families in one village to convert under threat of death, area Christians said.

Bareka village resident Goliath Digal, 58, told Compass that the Hindu hardliners have taken 18 Roman Catholic families to a Hindu temple and performed Hindu rituals on them, forcing them to sign statements that they had converted of their own will.

"During the riots, all our belongings had been taken away and we were left with nothing," Digal said. "Now they are threatening to murder us if we do not become Hindus."

Of the 22 other families in Bareka, 16 have returned to the village from relief camps but are living in fear, Digal said, and the rest have fled to Berampur, Jharsuguda and to nearby villages with no plans to return. He added that he and others with farmland near the village have not been able to cultivate crops out of fear and opposition.

Fear of Return

In G. Udayagiri refugee camp, 55-year-old Vipin Nayak of Piangia Budaripura village said that all 400 Christian families from the hamlet have remained in the camp except for five families who were allowed to return after being forced to become Hindus.

"We cannot enter the village until we become Hindus - if we do return, we risk our lives," said Nayak, whose brother, Vikram Nayak, was killed in the anti-Christian violence that lasted for more than two months.

The Hindu hardliners have ordered the Christians to enter the village carrying Hindu scripture, the Bhagwat Geeta, in their hands if they want to return to the village, he said. Many Christians have tried to sneak into the village and were kidnapped and had their heads tonsured, Nayak said.

In Tikabali relief camp, 20-year-old Geetanjali Digal told Compass that Hindu extremists are telling villagers, "Once again we will attack, and riots will take place. We burned your houses, this time we will kill you all. Nobody will be left alive."

Another source told Compass that one of the most dangerous hamlets is Badimunda. "Christians cannot step into the village at all," said the source.

Prabhasini Nayak, a 20-year-old Christian resident of Kakamaha village, Panganaju, who remains in G. Udayagiri relief camp, said Hindus have threatened to impose monetary punishment on her Hindu uncle and his family if they make contact with her and Christian members of her family.

"The fundamentalists have threatened my uncle's family to have no ties with us," she said. "If they are found doing so, they will have to pay a fine of 5,000 rupees [US\$100] to the fundamentalists."

Peace Committees Fail

The district collector of Kandhamal, Dr. Krishna Kumar, said his office has received 68 to 70 complaints of forcible conversion of Christians to Hinduism, "and in all such cases police complaints have been registered and action is being taken."

Christian leaders from Kandhamal said the government has set up meetings of "Peace Committees" to aid refugee camp dwellers to return to their home villages, but in many places the presiding officials failed to show up.

Kumar, however, told Compass that reconciliation has begun in various places. "Peace Committees have been very successful," he said.

Area Christian leaders maintained that the Peace Committees will help little as there is almost no willingness by hard-line Hindus to tolerate Christian presence.

"Only Hindus and no Christians' is the new slogan of Hindu fundamentalists in the area," said one pastor on condition of anonymity. "Christians have to become Hindus or leave."

Last month, India's Supreme Court ordered the Orissa state government, led by an alliance that includes the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, to ensure protection for the state's Christian minority.

The violence last year resulted from Hindu extremist organizations blaming Christians for the murder of Hindu leader Laxmanananda Saraswati on Aug. 23. Police, however, have charged Maoist extremists for the killings. A Communist Party fact-finding team estimated at least 500 people were murdered. More than 50,000 people were left homeless as some 5,000 houses were burned or destroyed, and 252 churches were destroyed.

Dr. Kumar said that smaller, transitional relief camps have been established in various blocks of the district, closer to villages, so that in time residents might be emboldened to venture freely back to their homes.

Asserting that only 1,500 people are left in refugee camps, Dr. Kumar said that 75 percent of those who fled have returned to their villages.

But Christian leaders from the district said that people who have left relief camps have not returned to their villages but migrated to safer places, especially the larger cities of Berhampur, Cuttack and Bhubaneswar. They estimated that most are working as day-laborers and are not earning enough to survive.

Geetanjali Digal of the Tikabali relief camp told Compass that the camp still provides a key source of food.

"They have burnt our house," Digal said. "All that we had is burnt. We have put a small tent in the place of our house that was burnt, but for food we go to the camp. My father is unable to get any work."

Prabhasini Nayak of G. Udayagiri refugee camp said many people in the camps are eagerly awaiting government compensation to rebuild their homes so that they can start life anew.

"We are one of them," she said.

Orissa: Hindu temple being built atop rubble of Batticola church

AsiaNews (06.02.2009) / HRWF (09.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The foundations have been laid for a Hindu temple on the rubble of the church in Batticola, in the district of Kandhamal (Orissa). And the Christians returning to their villages are being pressured to convert to Hinduism. This information comes to AsiaNews from Sajan George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians, who has received eyewitness testimonies from the northwestern state.

The church in Batticola was rased to the ground and burned last August, at the beginning of the violence against Christians. Now, a foundation about one meter high has been laid in order to build a Hindu temple there. "On Feb 2nd around 12 noon, about 17 people, mostly men, left the G. Udaygiri relief camp to check on conditions at the Dokewadi hamlet in Jhimangia village before returning there. These Christians were surrounded by the Hindu villagers and given a dire warning: if they wanted to come back to the village, they had to convert to Hinduism."

Batticola is one of the primary targets of the anti-Christian campaign. Sajan Geogre says that last October, a Hindu fundamental group released a falsified document purported to be the minutes of a Batticola Catholic parish council meeting on May 25 that allegedly conspired to assassinate 85-year-old Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati. The killing of the swami last August 23 was the spark that ignited the series of attacks that killed at least 500 people, destroyed thousands of homes, burned hundreds of churches, and made more than 50,000 Christians flee.

The text of the minutes falsified by the extremists depicted the Christians as wanting to "offer sacrifices" against the "Satanic activities that stand opposed to the expansion" of the parish. The only problem is that the ritual words used in the document - in the Oriya language - belong entirely to the Hindu tradition, not to the Christian tradition, leading to the suspicion that the document is a complete fake.

This news from Batticola is a sign that the situation on the ground is not calm, although the government continues to give assurances that the danger has passed, and is closing the refugee camps, sending Christians back to their ruined homes.

Other sources say that some Christians who have gone back to Batticola have faced constant humiliation and discrimination. The Hindus in the village have instituted 15 unwritten rules against the Christians. One of them is that Christians should always give way to Hindus in the street; that in the public baths, the Christians should bathe last; etc.

All of this - the sources say - is very strange, because until recently "these people have lived together, celebrated festivals together, and basically a communitarian spirit prevailed, and yet there is a perverted sense of superiority and crushing the dignity of the Christians."

The Catholic church in Batticola was inaugurated in 1995. The Hindu radicals, under the leadership of Swami Laxamananda, tried to rase it to the ground in 2000.

Hindu fundamentalists vandalise Catholic school in Bophal

Violence is triggered by trumpeted up charges against the school principal

AsiaNews/UCAN (04.02.2009) / HRWF (05.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A group of young Hindu radicals attacked a Catholic school on Monday in Bhopal, capital of Madhya Pradesh, destroying classrooms and equipment. The school principal, a Catholic priest, was arrested for insulting India's national anthem.

This attack was triggered by an incident that occurred on 26 January, Republic Day, which led a group of teachers at St. Thomas Senior Secondary School to accuse the principal, Fr Thomas Malancheruvil, of stopping them and their students from singing the national anthem. Under Indian law such a crime can be punished with three years in jail.

The accused principal has rejected the charges, saying all he did was to rebuke the teacher responsible for the school's National Day programme for being late.

Father Malancheruvil told the teacher that would be suspended for a three days but withdrew the suspension the same day when the teacher apologised.

Later however the same teacher, a colleague and a group of students spread rumours that the principal had prevented some students from singing the anthem.

This was used as a pretext by a group of 30 activists from the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the youth wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who attacked the school destroying computers, furniture and windowpanes.

Called by the principal police moved in, arrested the young activists and Father Thomas himself. Five AVBP intruders were hurt in the incident.

The clergyman and 15 attackers of the Catholic school were later released on bail.

Recent incidents of persecution

By Nirmala Carvalho and Mahruaii Sailo

Compass Direct (30.01.2009) / HRWF (31.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Hindu extremists on Jan. 26 disrupted a baptism and thrashed believers at Gangapur Dam, Nashik district. The Times of India reported that as members of the Navjivan Fellowship Church were conducting a baptism ceremony at the dam, a group of 10 to 12 men armed with cricket stumps, iron rods and sticks arrived and beat those present, including women and children. They also damaged the car of one Christian. Winston Daniel, whose head was injured during the assault, told the national daily that the attack was so meticulously planned that the group left behind no clues to

ascertain their identity. The Hindustan Times reported that Sangeeta Paulat, who also was injured, said the assailants shouted, "Jai Shri Ram [hail to Lord Ram]" while beating them. Suresh Patil suffered a head injury, and Himmat Wagh received hospital treatment for a fractured hand. Sanjay Pandit suffered a broken leg and was recovering at Nashik General (Civil) Hospital. A complaint was filed with Nashik Taluk police, and a case of rioting was registered against the unidentified men.

Andhra Pradesh – Hindu extremists from the Hindu extremist Rashtrya Swayamsevak Sangh on Jan. 26 vandalized and attacked the nuns at St. Mary School in Kadiri. The Christian Legal Association (CLA) reported that a mob of about 12 extremists led by Vishnuvardhan Reddy barged into the school premises accusing authorities of not hoisting the flag on India's Republic day. The extremists destroyed furniture, window panes and attacked the sisters, and area pastors reported the incident to police. A deputy superintendent of police identified only as Sainad told Compass that school officials and the attackers reached a compromise. The CLA reported that the school principal said the students had not come to school as there was a solar eclipse, but that the flag had been hoisted inside the building.

Madhya Pradesh – Hindu extremists accused a pastor of "harming religious sentiments" in Sanjay Koyla Nagar, Anoopur district, according to the Christian Legal Association. On Jan. 18 police went to the house of pastor Paulose Venkatarao of an area Pentecostal church around midnight on a complaint filed by Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) extremists accusing the pastor of selling a book, "Dharam Nirpeksh Evam Hindutva," which they said harmed the sentiments of the Hindus. The Evangelical Fellowship of India reported that police told the pastor to go to the police station at 1 a.m., following a three-day convention the church had organized on Jan. 16-18, attended by a team from Bible College of Nagaland and pastors from abroad. At the police station, officers reprimanded the pastor; he gave a statement saying he had no idea who was selling books at the convention. Police officials told Compass that the pastor was called to the station for his own security as the extremists were creating a disturbance. No case was registered against the pastor.

Chhattisgarh – On Jan. 18 about 1,000 Hindu extremists gathered in anti-Christian protest in Palnar, Dendewada. The Evangelical Fellowship of India reported that the extremists shouted anti-Christian slogans, asserting that they wanted to wipe out all Christians and their activities in the area. The Hindu extremists reportedly staged the protest in response to Christians who were arrested on Jan. 5 on charges of defiling an area Hindu temple. After several calls by Christian leaders, police came to the area and dispersed the crowd.

Andhra Pradesh – Suspected Hindu extremists on Jan. 16 attacked a pastor in Gunpula, Karimnagar district. The Global Council of Indian Christians reported that six persons with their faces masked barged into the house of pastor Yakobu Jacob and began assaulting him. They shaved his head and burned his house with all his belongings. The intolerant Hindus also shouted that there should not be any Christian pastor in the village. The pastor filed a police complaint, and officers at Potkapalli police station registered a case against the extremists. Sub-Inspector D. Pratab told Compass that a police investigation was continuing.

Karnataka – Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) extremists on Jan. 11 forcibly entered the home of Christian converts in Amrthmahal Kavalu hamlet, near Tiptur town in Tumkur district. They verbally abused the four Christians there, burned their Bibles and forced them to the Honnavalli police station, according to the Global Council of Indian Christians. Identified only as Shankarappa and his wife Leelamama, and Shivappa and his wife Manjamma, the two brothers and their wives are the only Christians resident in the village. They worship at Calvary Gospel Centre in Tiptur town. The church's pastor, Joy Jacob, told Compass that at around 10:30 p.m. nine local Hindu extremists barged into

the house using foul language, falsely accused the Christians of forcible conversions and tore up and burned two Bibles. They threatened to burn down the Christians' house if they continued to worship at the Calvary Gospel Centre. Police arrived and took the Christians to the police station as the extremists shouted Hindu chants along the way. On Jan. 12 about 9 a.m., Jacob went to the police station to register a complaint but officers refused to accept it. They instead arranged a compromise agreement, with the Christians forgiving the assailants.

Karnataka – Police on Jan. 9 arrested pastor Iswar Albannavar of the Throne of Grace Ministry in Gangavadi slum, Belgaum for forcible conversion, but when the accusations proved false they were held for promoting religious enmity. The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported that Albannavar and his wife Renuka were conducting their regular weekly prayer meeting in their home for about 25 Christians, mostly recovering alcoholics, when police officials from Mala Maruthi police station stormed into the house. On the basis of a complaint filed by Hanmant Gargoti, officers falsely charged the pastor with forcible conversion and confiscated Bibles and hymn books, GCIC said. Police took the pastor and another Christian, Raju Kolkar, to the police station for questioning, after which Albannavar and Kolkar were sent to Belgaum Central Jail. An investigating officer identified only as Channakeshava told the Christian Legal Association that the two Christians were charged with promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion.

Karnataka – Four suspected Hindu extremists on motorbikes beat teacher James Victor Menezes, 52, a teacher at St. Legory's School in Merlapadavu village near Mangalore on Jan. 7, reported the Daijiworld Media Network. Father Charles Menezes of the school told Compass that he strongly suspected the hand of Hindu extremists in the attack. On Jan. 2 the Catholic school had distributed Bibles; officials had announced that the Bibles were intended only for Christians, but a few others also picked up copies. The next day, protestors appeared in front of the school from Hindu groups, including the Srirama Sene (Army of Lord Ram). "The protestors falsely accused the schoolteachers of distributing Bibles to Hindus," Fr. Meneze said. The beaten school teacher said he filed a complaint with the Kankanady police station, reportedly informing police that he would be able to identify the attackers, as they had also taken part in the protest. At press time no arrests had been made.

Chhattisgarh – Police on Jan. 5 arrested 10 Christians in Dantewada for allegedly defiling a Hindu temple. The Evangelical Fellowship of India reported that on Christmas Day around 40 Christians from the Bastar for Christ (BFC) house church in Palnar village, Dantewada had gone to Phulpad for a picnic and had inadvertently left behind a few paper plates and some food. Unidentified mischief-makers gathered up the leftovers and piled them at a small Hindu temple nearby, then took photographs of the supposed defilement. Local sources told Compass that on Dec. 28 and Jan. 4, area Hindu extremists disrupted a prayer service at the BFC house church, and on Jan. 5 police from Kua Kunda arrested associate pastor Shankar Sona and nine other Christians based on a police complaint filed by a Hindu extremist using the photograph as evidence. Police charged the Christians with damaging or defiling a place of worship, and they were all released on bail the same day.

Madhya Pradesh – Police on Jan. 5 arrested Christians in Kushalpura village, near Rajgarh in Dhar district after Hindu extremists attacked them. Dr. Sajan K. George of the Global Council of Indian Christians, said that pastor Kantilal Bhuria of Philadelphia Church was conducting a house-blessing service at the home of Badar Baria when nearly 10 members of the Hindu extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Vishwa Hindu Parishad stormed into the house, assaulted the Christians and falsely accused the pastor of forcible conversion. The extremists phoned police, and as is customary in India officers jailed the victims of the Hindu extremist aggression. Pastor Bhuria and Baria were taken to the Sardarpur police station. Investigating officer Upendra Khare informed the

Christian Legal Association that the Christians were arrested for injuring or defiling a place of worship with intent to insult religion. At press time the Christians were still in jail.

Karnataka – Airport police in Bangalore on Jan. 4 arrested three Christians for trying to fraudulently convert residents of Murugeshpalya and for disparaging Hindu gods, the Times of India reported. Police arrested Rama Reddy, 26, Mike Barabas, 35, and his wife Asmira Barabas based on a complaint by Prabhod Kumar Das that they were involved in “denigration of Hindu gods.” The complaint also stated that the three persons promised him money and a job if he agreed to convert. The newspaper reported that the three visited Das’ house for one week and persuaded him to change his religion. When the three went to Das’ house on Jan. 4, he went out and called people from the area who took hold of the Christians and handed them over to airport police. Officials seized books, handouts and other evangelistic materials from the accused. Airport police officials told Compass that the three Christians were in jail and have been charged with trespassing, hurting religious sentiments and promoting enmity between different religious groups.

Karnataka – Police on Jan. 4 arrested a pastor on a false complaint of forcible conversion by Hindu extremists in Kanakapura Taluk, Ramnagar district. The Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported that nearly 25 extremists belonging to the Hindu extremist Bajrang Dal stormed the worship service of the India Christian Revival Mission, verbally abused the congregation and chased them from the building. The extremists repeatedly slapped and kicked the pastor, identified only as Paul, and his son Barnabas. The intolerant Hindus dragged them both outside and took them to the Kanakapura police station, where they filed the false complaint of forcible conversion against the pastor. A GCIC representative told Compass that police detained the Christians at the station until about 7:30 p.m., when GCIC intervention resulted in a compromise between the pastor and the assailants. Having forgiven them, the pastor declined to press charges, and police gave assurances that adequate protection would be extended to the church in Kanakapura.

Karnataka – Hindu extremists on Jan. 1 burned a house church of the Resurrected God’s Ministry in Malai Bennur, Davangere district. The Christian Legal Association reported that the extremists burned the church in the early morning hours and threatened a pastor identified only as Gangadhar that they would burn his family alive if he took the matter to authorities. The Deccan Herald News Service reported that one section of the church built with areca leaves was gutted in the fire, while the other side of the church was partially burned. This incident was reportedly the second attack on the church, with the earlier incident taking place on Nov. 11, 2007. Superintendent of Police Sandip Patil told Compass that one person had been arrested under Section 436 of the Indian Penal Code for intent to destroy a house with fire or explosives.

India blocks 'preaching' bishop

BBC (13.01.2009) / HRWF (15.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – The Bishop of Gloucester was refused entry to India because he was unable to promise not to preach.

The Right Reverend Michael Perham had wanted to visit the city's partner dioceses in Dornakal and Karnataka Central.

He had a tourist visa, which the Indian High Commission said was insufficient for "work" purposes.

A commission spokesman in London, said: "On a tourist visa he should not and must not preach."

'Business visa'

The bishop's chaplain, Aiden Platten, said they had previously travelled on tourist visas to India without problems.

He said: "The visas were tourist visas - that is what we applied for previously and we have been to India lots of times.

"Our passports were lost and when we got them back they had no visas because the rules had changed at the end of last year.

"They said they would give us the visa only if we assured them we would do no preaching.

"My understanding now is that the clergy need a business visa if they want to do anything which is part of their work."

Mr Kaushik, a visa attache from the Indian High Commission, said: "If the bishop wants to go to India to visit churches or organisations to work with them we need a letter from the churches he was visiting and the approval of the government of India. Then we would look at what visa is appropriate."

Lucy Taylor, communication officer for the dioceses, made it clear that the incident did not mean that the bishop was banned from preaching in India. She said that he was hoping to re-arrange the trip for later in 2009.
