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Church building, homes of four Christian converts in Nepal torched

BarnabaSaid (07.01.2014) - A church building and the homes of four people who had converted to Christianity were torched in Nepal just before Christmas.

The arson attacks in the village of Kichet, near the capital, Kathmandu, happened on 23 December. The church was targeted first, followed by the homes of Ganga Lama Tamang, Lama Bahadur Tamang, Lama Bokta and Bikram Lama.

Some residents tried to stop the group of nine assailants but were beaten up. The congregation returned from their Christmas holidays on 29 December to find the church building destroyed.

It is thought that Hindu extremists carried out the attacks to deter others from converting to Christianity.

The Nepali government is said to be downplaying the incident, prompting calls from the Christian community for the authorities to bring those responsible to justice.

The Rev C.B. Gahatraj said:

The authorities are reluctant to meet our requests and are ignoring cases when the victims are Christian. Things like this should not happen in a secular nation.

Attacks on Christians in Nepal are uncommon, but the church and house burnings follow an especially sinister incident last October.

Debalal (36), a Christian leader, was murdered by a Hindu man who claimed that he needed prayer for healing and deliverance. Debalal went to the Hindu's home in the middle of the night, and while he was praying, the Hindu left the room and returned with an iron rod and a sharp curved knife. He beat the Christian with the rod before slitting his throat.

Hindu extremists see the growth of the Church in Nepal as a threat. Although the 2011 census recorded fewer than 376,000 Christians, church leaders protested that this figure is a gross underestimate and that there are now more than 2.5 million Christians in the country (around 9% of the population). Most new Christians are converts from Hinduism, and so face ostracism from their communities and, occasionally, hostility and discrimination.

Hindu extremist groups, such as the Nepal Defence Army (NDA), are intent on making Nepal a Hindu nation, as it was until 2006. Popular support for this cause appears to be growing; a Hindu nationalist party made significant election gains in 2013.

Christians have no right to a cemetery

Asia News (09.03.2013) - Christian communities in Kathmandu are being forced to bury their dead outside official cemeteries. Local sources told *AsiaNews* that "since the government has banned the construction of a cemetery near the Hindu shrine of Pashupatinath, Christians and other religious minorities in the country must perform their funeral rites in forests, near rivers, away from population centres and places under the control of Hindu radicals."

Two years ago, city authorities decided to "protect" the Hindu temple of Pashupatinath from the presence of other religions, preventing Nepalis from other religious groups from carrying out their funeral rites near the sanctuary.

"It was decided to protect the sacredness of Hindu land," said Sushil Nahata, a member of the Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT). "In some areas, cemeteries were expanding in an unregulated manner. It is the responsibility of the government to ensure that Christians are given specific and separate areas."

As a result of government action, religious minorities in the Kathmandu Valley found themselves forced to bury their dead in hidden places, far from population centres, with the risk of desecration by some Hindu groups.

Between April and May 2011, members of the Christian community in the capital went on a hunger strike that lasted for 39 days. This led to the establishment of a 16-member committee, which includes the minister for Peace and Reconciliation, the minister of Culture and Tourism as well Christian leaders, whose task is to find a solution to the dispute.

However, in spite of the pressure from the religious minority, Nepali authorities have always preferred to stall or when they did give something, it was always very little.

Indeed, Culture Minister Ram Kumar Shreshatha noted that "the government is very close to granting the Christian community a burial ground," but so far the deadline set by the Committee has come and gone with nothing done.

"If promises prove untrue, Christians (who make up 1 .4 per cent of the Nepali population) will be forced to launch a new wave of nationwide protests," said a still hopeful C.B. Gahatrai.
