

India: A Timeline of Persecution

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A once-beautiful church building burned to the ground. Children crying for parents who will never return. Blood-stained machetes lying on the ground near a perpetrator's home. According to Compass Direct News, these are snapshots of a war zone that has gone largely unnoticed in recent months.

Since December of 2007, southern India's Christian community has been rocked by unchecked terrorist attacks perpetrated by Hindu extremists in the area. Local extremist groups have burned and pillaged churches and homes, aiming to obliterate Christian activity in the region. The brief timeline of events shown below chronicles the intensified carnage, starting in December of 2007.

Timeline of Tragedy

The anti-Christian violence in southern India erupted overnight – literally – in December of 2007. But it wasn't until August, just a few months ago, that the most gruesome atrocities started.

December 24, 2007: Local Christians are given no warning ahead of targeted attacks by Hindu extremists in Orissa state. The attacks are largely instigated by Hindu extremist leader Swami Lakhmananda Saraswati, head of the World Hindu Council (also known as Vishwa Hindu Parishad, or VHP). The violence lasts for over a week, leaving in its wake 730 burned homes, and 95 torched churches. Four Christian are believed to be dead.

August 23, 2008: Swami Lakhmananda Saraswati, is murdered. His unexpected death triggers outrage among Hindu extremist groups, who place the blame on local Christians.

August 24, 2008: Outrage spills into overt violence against the Christian community once more, as enraged Hindus instigate modern India's worst-ever epidemic of violence. The attacks begin in the forest district of Kandhamal, in Orissa state. 4,500 homes and churches are destroyed.

August 27, 2008: Human Rights Watch reports that, as of today, "At least nine people are said to have been killed. Reports exist of two people burnt alive, three men hacked to death, a nun gang-raped and churches and houses destroyed in at least twelve districts." The violence continues.

September 1, 2008: A Maoist group claims responsibility for the murders of Swami Lakhmananda Saraswati and four of his followers. But radical Hindu groups persist in blaming the Christian community for the murders. By now, the attacks have claimed the lives of 36 people.

October 27, 2008: The carnage triggered by Saraswati's murder has now raged on for two months. The official death toll falls between 30-40 people, but a fact-finding team sponsored by the Communist Party of India-Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML) thinks otherwise. After visiting

Kandhamal, the team releases a report suggesting that the government has been downplaying – and possibly even covering up – the number of deaths due to the violence. Their estimate falls around 500, partly due to the account of a senior government official who confessed to burning 200 bodies found in the jungle after the attacks began, according to Compass Direct.

November 15, 2008: The president of the Laxmanananda Saraswati Condolence Society sends the Orissa government a letter threatening to impose a bandh, or forced shut-down of the area, on Christmas Day. Christians fear that Hindu extremists groups will carry out the threat, effectively preventing Christians from publically celebrating Christmas.

December 1, 2008: An India-based Christian group Kandhamal Christian Jankalyan Samaj (KCJS) reports that the government is pushing Christians to leave relief camps and return to their homes – in spite of ongoing danger. Refugees feel insecure about returning to homes that have yet to be repaired after the violence, especially with continuing incidents of persecution taking place across the state.

Refugee Dilemma

District authorities report that 12,641 terror victims who have fled the killings are currently residing in seven refugee camps scattered across the Khandhamal district. An article in the Indian Express states that 250 refugees who fled to neighboring Andhra Pradesh are refusing to return to their villages. Why? “Fear” is the answer.

The report released by the CPI-ML claims that “riot victims are frightened to go back to their villages because they have been threatened that if they return they will be cut into pieces. The rioters are also proclaiming that only Hindu converts will be allowed to return.”

Climate of Hatred

Conversion has long been a subject of debate across India, and not just in the southern states. As the nation surges forward with increasing economic investment and output, thousands of people trapped in the lower rungs of the Hindu caste system are looking for a way out. For many, Christianity provides the answer. But increased conversions among the 250 million poverty-stricken Dalits (members of the lowest caste in India) have triggered a backlash from Hindu nationalists.

Orissa State, where most of the violence against Christians has recently occurred, is controlled by two parties. One is a local party, called Biju Janata Dal. The other party is a Hindu nationalist party, Bharatiya Janata Party, which has close ties to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the group that Saraswati was allied with – a group that initiated numerous brutal attacks on Christians.

For Christians in Orissa and neighboring locales, the outlook seems grim. As a minority religion making up only 2.3% of the population in a nation that is 80.5% Hindu, many feel not only oppressed but isolated. When, on the rare occasion that their stories emerge in the mainstream

media, they are often tainted with inaccuracies put forth by local authorities seeking to protect their reputation. It's a challenge to simply get their voice to be heard.

“The lack of government response [to the Orissa violence] is alarming to say the least,” International Christian Concern’s president Jeff King said ahead of a Washington DC rally on behalf of Indian refugees. “At this point, the lack of any serious response from Orissa officials looks to the entire world as complicity with the radical Hindus that are doing the actual damage.”

Protests, Prayers, and Petitions

September 25 was a rainy day in Washington, D.C. Outside the White House dozens of wet protesters held signs calling for an end to the violence in southern India. The rally coincided with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s visit to the White House. The diverse coalition of organizations participating in the protest included Jubilee Campaign, International Christian Concern (ICC), the Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations of North America (FIACONA), the Indian American Catholic Association (IACA), the Indian Christian Forum (ICF), and Christian Solidarity International. Attendees prayed, voiced concern over recent attacks over a loudspeaker, and pleaded for the attention of the Indian government.

On November 9, churches around the world observed the International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church, remembering those who are suffering for their faith in India and beyond. Thousands of Christians participated in the interdenominational event, recalling the horrific events in Orissa and lifting up affected victims in prayer.

Ongoing efforts to raise awareness and action on behalf of India’s suffering Christian community include an advocacy campaign sponsored by Open Doors, urging the Indian government to curb religious violence in Orissa and take measures to protect individuals of minority faiths.

“More than 60 people have been killed,” reads a letter signed by over 20 Christian leaders, and sent to President Bush on November 7, 2008.

“Some 50,000 people have been left homeless; and some still remain in hiding.” The letter calls on President Bush to hold the Indian government accountable for the Orissa attacks, citing that the degree of violence in India has reached an extreme level.

“What has happened recently in India,” the letter continues,” and has been happening over the past few years, is tantamount to ‘religious cleansing’ of Christians and other minorities by extremists.”

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