

THE HORROR OF ORISSA 2008

During the past three weeks there has been a total breakdown of law and order in Orissa, India. There has been persecution of innocent Christians on a scale hitherto unknown in India. Believers have been brutalised and murdered and all over the world a voice of protest has been raised and millions are praying for peace and justice in this troubled area.

This folder includes the texts of three urgent reports presented by the Maranatha Community to the Foreign & Commonwealth Office on 29th August, 5th September & 10th September 2008. It has been sent to the Prime Minister, as well as a broad range of political and church leaders. It has been distributed extensively abroad and has also been sent to Asma Jahangir, the UN Rapporteur on Religious Freedom. Appeals have also been made to the President and Prime Minister of India.

Close contact has been maintained with Christians in India and the Maranatha Community, together with other groups has mobilised a network of campaigners in the United Kingdom and overseas. A global protest is now emerging. The cry of the Christians of Orissa must be heard without delay and help must come swiftly.

**The Maranatha Community is a movement of many thousands of Christians in all the churches throughout the United Kingdom. Established 27 years ago it is deeply engaged in work for those in need, especially the young. Its membership includes many who are engaged in a professional or voluntary capacity in the caring professions and in relief work. It is deeply involved with Parliamentary and international affairs and has considerable experience of work for peace and reconciliation.
The Leader and Co-Founder of the Community is Mr. Dennis Wrigley.**

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ORISSA: First Report – 29th August 2008

From the Maranatha Community to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Huge and bloody upsurge of anti-Christian violence in parts of Orissa in India

The situation

1. Last Saturday, 23rd August 08, suspected Maoists killed a senior Hindu leader and four others in a remote eastern Indian village in Orissa, North East India. The remote, forested region is known to be a place of religious tensions between hardline Hindus who falsely accuse Christians of bribing poor tribes people and low-caste Hindus to change their faith. Orissa is around 94% Hindu and 2.4% Christian.
2. The Hindu leader who was killed, Laxmanananda Saraswati, was among five people slain by unidentified armed men who stormed a Hindu school in the nearby district of Kandhamal. The police blamed Maoist insurgents who prevail in the area. Saraswati's followers, however, blamed Christians.
3. The killed Hindu leader had been associated with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, or World Hindu Council, and who was leading a local campaign to reconvert Hindus and tribal people from Christianity.
4. This has been followed by an upsurge of violence by Hindus against Christians in the area, apparently actively encouraged by members of Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Subsequently more than 400 churches have been destroyed, hundreds of Christian homes have been destroyed, at least 1500 people have fled their homes, trying to take shelter in the forest. Despite 2000 police presence, the authorities have been unable to stop the violence which is ongoing and deteriorating.

Instances of atrocities committed

- There have been numerous atrocities covering a wide area of Orissa. These include mob violence in Udayagiri, Sundergargh, Gajapati and Rayaagada districts.
- Amongst the slogans shouted was, "Kill Christians and destroy their institutions".
- On Monday a 24- year-old Catholic lay missionary Rajani Majhi was burnt alive.
- On Tuesday a pastor Mukunda Bardhan was burnt to death in Makundapur, Gajapati.
- A nun has been gang-raped.
- In one instance two Christians have been hacked to death this week in Mutungia village, one Christian in Petaponga village, one in Borimunda village, 3 in Katinga village, 3 in Tianga village, 3 in Adikuppa village and one in Bakingia village.
- A least four hundred churches have been destroyed in addition to many hundreds of Christian homes.
- Pastor Samuel Naik of the Seventh Day Adventist Church at Kandhamal was killed.
- Jacob Digal and Gopan Naik of Damba village were killed.
- Pastor Alok Das and Pastor I.M. Senapati were beaten at Kharihar
- Pastor David Diamond Pahar was beaten by more than 200 people in Aampani.

Statements by witnesses

At least 1,500 people have fled their homes for shelters. Witnesses in eastern Orissa state estimated the same number again were hiding in forests or camping out at police stations in fear for their lives, although this could not be confirmed.

"Over 300 people fled our village and have taken shelter in the forest," Kanu Chandra Nayek stated after his village was attacked by a Hindu mob.

"Here we have almost nothing to eat, there's a constant downpour, our children are sick."

State officials said 167 people had been arrested after rioters torched nearly 500 houses as well as Christian prayer halls and vehicles in Orissa.

Some 2,000 federal and state police have been sent to the worst-hit Kandhamal area in the last three days, senior district official Kishan Kumar said.

Mgr Raphael Cheenath, Verbite, Archbishop of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar (Orissa), described the situation of the faithful under his care after two days of attacks by radical Hindus against churches. "Father Thomas, director of our pastoral centre, is hiding in the forest," the archbishop said. "From there, tears in his eyes and sorrow in his heart, he saw it go up in smoke. Just before the attack he phoned me and I told him: 'Pray and be vigilant.' But when he saw mobs of people coming towards the centre he had to flee for his life. As soon as we heard about Swami Laxmananda Saraswati's assassination I issued a public statement strongly condemning the dastardly attack and murders. I called on everyone to remain peaceful and in harmony. We feel totally abandoned. This morning the authorities sent three policemen to watch over the nuns' convent and the bishop's residence. But they don't even have a stick to protect us from the fury of the mob!"

Swarupananda Patra, General Secretary of the Orissa Baptist Churches Federation issued an appeal for prayer to the Baptist World Alliance: "Now we have no request except prayer from our Baptist world as we do not know how to face tomorrow."

The Rt Revd Sunil K Singh, Bishop of North India, speaking about the situation in Orissa said "There has been a total breakdown of law and order resulting from barbaric communal attacks by anti-Christian elements on innocent and peace loving Christians, their priests, nuns, religious workers, their churches and organisations."

The Rev. Dr. Babu Joseph, spokesman for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India stated that Christians in Orissa were living in fear and anxiety.

Other Statements

On 27 August 2008, Pope Benedict condemned spiralling violence against Christians in India but also deplored the killing of a Hindu leader that sparked clashes. "While I firmly condemn every attack on human life, whose sacredness required respect by all, I express my spiritual closeness and solidarity to the brothers and sisters in the faith who are so sorely tried," he told pilgrims and tourists at his weekly general audience. The Pope specifically condemned the killing last week of a Hindu leader linked to the main opposition Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and four others.

On Thursday 28th August, Dennis Wrigley, the leader of the Maranatha Community and a member of the FCO Religious Freedom Panel, was in direct contact with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council). They had called a bandh (a protest strike) following the murder of five of their leaders apparently by Maoist extremists. Sadly the VHP have used this tragedy to turn the mobs against the Christian community which is entirely innocent. Mr Wrigley expressed sadness at the murder and passed the love of the Community to them. When he urged an end to all violence, the response was the expression of total hatred for all Christians and also an insistence that no conversions would ever be tolerated.

Concern has already been expressed to the Indian High Commission in London and requests for help have been made to the Hindu Council, UK. The Maranatha Community is anxious that a public statement is made by the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary condemning this outrage and requesting the Indian Government to take immediate and urgent action. The situation is still extremely grave at the end of this week of exceptional violence and further escalation is possible unless strong action is taken.

Historic Background

Religious tensions in Orissa date back to the 1970s when anti-conversion legislation was passed by the state. Under the law, people wishing to convert to Christianity must apply to district authorities for approval to be baptised or face a fine or imprisonment. Since then seven other states have passed similar legislation. The laws in each state seek to set conditions for conversion,

but penalties imposed in the form of the loss of economic and education rights following conversion vary.

Indians of lower castes, now known as Dalits, were reported to have been the targets of much of the violence in Orissa. India has affirmative action legislation which reserves access to some government jobs and education opportunities for people from economically or socially marginalised castes. Christian Dalits have, however, historically been denied these "reservation" rights on the basis that as Christians they are free from discrimination based on the Hindu caste system. India's 160 million Dalits represent one seventh of the country's population. Fears that proposals to extend affirmative action benefits to Dalit Christians would make it more attractive to convert have led Hindus to resist proposals to extend "Reservation" rights to Dalit converts.

Further complicating the situation, people known as Tribals in Orissa who convert to Christianity are allowed to retain their affirmative action "reservation" rights. Dalits and Tribals account for nearly 75 per cent of all converted Christians in India.

With the rise in religious intolerance, there are also fears that freedom of religion in India is under serious attack. In a statement released in December 2007, Human Rights Watch urged both Hindu and Christian leaders to work toward peaceful reconciliation, warning that India's secular identity is at risk.

There have been attacks on Christians in the past in Orissa and other parts of India. In 1999, a Hindu mob killed Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two children by burning them in their car in Orissa.

Maoist influence

The region is a stronghold of Maoist rebels and police say they have evidence to link the guerrillas to Saturday's attack. "We have found a letter from the spot which indicates that it may be a Maoists attack," Kishan Kumar, the area's top government official, told Reuters, adding the automatic rifles used in the attack were similar to the ones used by the Maoists.

Police say by attacking Hindus the Maoists were trying to garner support among the region's poor tribes, most of which had converted to Christianity. "There are instances where the rebels have threatened Hindu temples here," said Satish Gajbhiye, a senior police official.

The violence which ravaged the Kandhamal district of Orissa last Christmas was then described as "the largest attack on the Christian community in the history of democratic India". This week the situation has been worse.

The Maranatha Community will continue to monitor this situation over the weekend.

ORISSA: Second Report – 5th September 2008

From the Maranatha Community to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Continuing barbaric behaviour against Christians in and around Orissa

The situation

Increasing outrage has been expressed all over the world at the spread of violence in Orissa during the past 12 days. Thousands of innocent, peaceful and law abiding Christians have been brutalised during the past week. They have been subjected to the most terrible violence and they have been ruthlessly robbed of their basic human rights. There is no doubt that it is the intention of the organised Hindu fanatics to wipe out Christianity from this part of India where Christians for many years worked selflessly amongst the poor and needy.

Immense damage is being inflicted on the good name of India and throughout the World there are now urgent demands upon people of every faith and none for immediate steps to be taken by the authorities in India to take action to stop the mayhem and to bring immediate help to the thousands of Christians who are now in desperate need. The thousands of wrecked houses, hostels, clinics and community centres must be rebuilt. A vast number of Christians hiding in the forests without any protection and in desperate need of food and shelter must receive emergency aid commencing this weekend. The situation is intolerable.

News coming in from Orissa today makes it clear that unless there is bold action and intervention by the Indian Government the outrages will continue and spread next week. Concepts of civilised living, freedom, justice and democracy are being ruthlessly overthrown. Innocent, harmless people are being brutalised. The conscience of the nations is being aroused and national leaders must raise their voices now without delay. There is a rising tide of protest in Britain which has a special relationship with India. It is hoped that the voice of Britain, through its Government, will be heard loud and clear this weekend. The prayers of ordinary people everywhere are being offered for the stricken Christians of Orissa.

Continuing Barbaric Behaviour

During the past week (the second week of the troubles) Hindu mobs have been on the rampage in more areas including the Kundra villages of the Jayapur district in Tikabali Block and Mondasore. This week numerous houses were burnt in the villages of Tikabali and Sarangada areas.

This week the Bishop of Balasore, in a Circular, has recorded outrages in numerous locations including Udayagiri, Ainthapally in Samdalpur, Sundargarh, Balliguda, Kanjamed, Christian Sahi in Balliguda, Kanjamendi, Sankrakhll, Bhadrak, Muniguda, Patapaga, Bhawanipatna and Gosaninuagaln of Berhanpur. He spoke of the incidents in depth and the depth of attacks on Christians. He spelt out the details of death and destruction.

Hindu Gangs on the rampage

The following are instances of atrocities committed by Hindu extremists in the past twelve days.

Case 1

Father Edward Sequeira ran a hostel-orphanage for poor girls to give them more opportunity and dignity through education and vocational training. The centre was in Kandhnal district. A mob of five hundred people came to the centre with axes, shovels and iron rods. He said "They took me outside in the courtyard and began hitting me, screaming abuses at Christianity and shouting bajrang, balikijai; Yesu Christi murdabada; hail lord Hanunan. " (Hindu god). "They shouted destroy, eliminate Jesus Christ, beating me on my head, back, all over my body for nearly an hour." They threw kerosene on his belongings and threw gelatine sticks to set fire to his home. They threw him into the flames and locked the door. Miraculously he survived and escaped. The mob threatened the children and some escaped. They then took a twelve year old girl who shouted "Father they are going to burn me". He said "I could hear the cries of Rajni Majhi and the mob was cheering and shouting.... They tied her hands together – they made a huge bonfire in the orphanage room and threw her onto the fire. They used sickles, shovels and other weapons to prevent her from running away, they did not allow her to even move from the burning flames." She died a terrible death.

Case 2

Ashish Missale was conducting a prayer meeting in Makandatur when three hundred Hindu activists arrived with swords, guns and spears. He said "They said they would kill us because we were Christians." He said "They hit Mukund Bardhan on his head. They then flung him in the air and stabbed him. His cry still pierces my ears." He and his flock had to flee to the forests. On the situation he said, "The police are on the side of the perpetrators."

Case 3

A mob of machete-wielding Hindus came at night to Suleswar. By next morning all Christian homes in the village were smoking heaps of burnt mud and concrete shells, churches were destroyed. Lal Mohm Digal said "We could hear them come shouting 'Jai shi ram' - a rallying cry of Hindus hailing their warrior god." Thatched rooftops were set ablaze with kerosene and church

spires were hacked down. The Hindu part of the village was untouched. The stricken Christians had to hide in the forests.

Case 4

According to Sajin K George, the national president of Global Council of the Indian Christians in Bhubaneswar, Orissa's state capital, Hindu militants have even pursued the Christians into the forests endeavouring to force them to go through Hindu conversion rituals. He said, "Truckloads of Hindu militants from neighbouring states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Andhrapradesh have emptied the area to back up the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad or World Hindu Council) campaign. Armed with bombs, swords and guns these VHP militants are pouncing on poor and defenceless Christians." He said "villages cowering in fear are giving in to their threats and going through the Hindu rituals. It is inhuman." Babu Joseph, another Christian leader said, "Hindu activists are shouting slogans in praise of Hinduism and shouting that they would 'reconvert' Christians throughout the country."

Case 5

Kabita Naik a 22 year old Christian girl fled from Raikia. She said Hindu activists besieged her village and refused to let the family buy medicines for her seriously sick grandmother. Because of this her grandmother died. She said "When the body of my grandmother was taken to the Christian burial ground by our (Christian) neighbours the Hindu activists forcibly took away the body and burnt it (as the Hindus do). They said "You are all Hindus and this Christian burial ground is not meant for your dead."

Forcible Re-conversions

There is widespread evidence of Hindu mobs enforcing conversions from Christians. In Padami Christians have been forced to carry out Hindu ceremonies and have received threats if they dare to practise Christianity. The press statement issued this week reads "The Catholic Bishops Conference of India CBCI is shocked to learn that the Christians in Orissa who have been already victims of violence are now being forced to become Hindus and attack their own churches in which they have been worshipping so long. This is totally inhuman and a gross violation of human rights.

Appeals

Appeals for action have been made to His Excellency Muralidhar Shandrakant Bhandare, the Governor of Orissa. He was told of the State's failure to safeguard life and property of Christians in Orissa by Reverend P R Parichha of the All India Christian Council, Orissa.

A major appeal has been made to the President of India. Three days ago a Citizen's Delegation comprising eminent Indians met the President Pratibha Patil. They told her that 50,000 Christians were hiding in the forests in the period of one week and that 300 hundred villages had been burned. The President was told that state government was in a coma and that its police were totally complicit in the violence and that the Sangh Parivar was creating havoc. The Citizen's Delegation presented a memorandum to the President of India in which they said "We appeal for restoration of law and order". They pleaded "We entreat you as President of the Republic to enforce the rule of law on Sangh Parivar organisations which blatantly flaunt their divisive agenda. Specifically we call upon you to bring the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Rashtrya Swayamsewak Sangh and Bagrang Dal under the rule of law." They pointed to the way in which the Hindu militants had been deliberately encouraging hatred of Christians.

The General Secretary of VHP, Parvin Togadia said, "It is clear that the Church killed the Swami." The Orissa state VHP secretary Presad Rath said, "This attack is the handiwork of the Christians." Ram Madhav RSS spokesman said, "Christians are behind the murders."

The memorandum warned the President "The consequences of any further delay, may be catastrophic for the small Christian community in the state in particular, for peace in Orissa in general and for the fair name of India as a secular country."

Calls for Peace

Mother Teresa's successor Sister Mirmala Joshi in a public appeal this week has said, "In the name of our country and its noble heritage, and in the name of the poor, the children and all our

suffering brothers and sisters who are victims of this senseless violence and distraction, I make this appeal: let us pray, opening our mind and heart to the light and love of God. Let us put down the weapon of hatred and violence and put on the armour of love.....”

ORISSA: Third Report – 10th September 2008

From the Maranatha Community to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Law and Order has broken down in Orissa and Christians continue to be persecuted

The situation

The extreme violence continues in this the third week of the troubles. Hindu gangs are continuing to burn Christians out of their homes, and destroy their churches and institutions. The authorities appear to be unable or unwilling to intervene and many thousands of Christians are being deprived of their basic human rights and indiscriminately assaulted. It is now clear that the attacks on Christians were not spontaneous but very carefully orchestrated by fundamentalist Hindu groups.

The campaign of violence continues

Last Friday many homes of Christians in Murudipanga village, Raikia were attacked, ransacked and set on fire. Eighty people in the village had to flee for their lives to a refuge camp. The people in these camps are extremely insecure, lacking adequate food and clothing and in at least three cases militant Hindus have endeavoured to poison the water supplies.

Last Saturday there were growing signs of belligerence and threats of violence against Christians in many parts. Violent slogans were written against Christians on the walls of all Christian institutions in Puri, including statements “Destroy the priests”. Deliberate efforts are being made to stop all Christian activity and Father T. Kurian in charge of Karunalaya Leprosy Centre was ordered to stop his tuition classes. Christian houses in Petemaha village were burnt and there were 8,500 destitute people who poured into the Raikia refuge camp. About 6,000 people have now fled to the refuge camp in G.Udayagiri. Further Christian houses were burnt in Breka village. Two thousand people were attacked at a church during morning worship at Bhudainjal. A pregnant woman tried to rescue her husband and was kicked in the stomach and had to be taken to hospital. On the same day a Hindu mob burned down a daycare centre in Bamnichatra.

Last Sunday the rampage against Christians continued and more than twenty houses belonging to Christians in Khajuripada were burnt to the ground. Also a mob of 2,000 Hindus attacked a church service in Bhundanijal.

Throughout the region Hindu gangs are now forcibly ‘reconverting’ Christians to Hinduism under threat of death. An example of this is the 70 Christian families in Bogapada, Borguda, Kuttiguda and Danniguda.

There are now signs that militant Hindu groups are intensifying their attacks on churches and Christian institutions elsewhere, particularly in the southern state of Karnataka.

Statements

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams has expressed profound distress at the extreme violence being used in Orissa and said *“I hope the Christians and people of faith around the world will make known their horror at this violence, their support for the rebuilding of lives and the churches, orphanages and schools destroyed, and work towards future reconciliation.”*

The World Council of Churches has called on the Prime Minister of India Manmohan Singh to intervene and *“ensure an immediate cessation of violence, the restoration of law and justice and*

sanctuary for the displaced in Orissa.” They said Orissa had seen “indiscriminate killing, burning of church buildings and destruction of institutions” over the last ten days.

The Catholic Bishops Conference of India said in a statement on the 8th September that relief camps needed more facilities and protection for the people who were *“still in the grip of fear and loss.”*

The Instigators of violence

It has been established beyond any doubt that the main propagators of the violence in Orissa are the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (so-called ‘World Hindu Council’) and their youth wing The Bajrang Dal.

The United Kingdom and Orissa

For the past two and a half weeks Christians throughout this country have been waiting for a statement from the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary condemning the situation in Orissa and making representation to the Indian Government at the highest level. This has not been forthcoming. It is not known whether the Foreign Secretary has met the Indian High Commissioner in London to emphasise the desperate need for urgent action. It is understood that a public statement by Mr Brown or Mr Milliband was not made because it was believed that a combined statement by the European Union Ministers would be more appropriate. However, no statement was made following the EU Ministers meeting last Friday (5th September).

There is widespread and growing concern at the deafening silence of the British Government on this issue. It is widely believed that our elected representatives should be speaking out on this appalling situation. It is felt that as a sovereign nation and as a member of the British Commonwealth we have a moral responsibility to speak out on this issue. It is being widely commented that if 600 Muslim mosques or Hindu temples had been destroyed by Christians the British Government would not have remained silent.

It had been hoped that the Hindu Council UK, which claims to be a “united Hindu voice”, could have brought pressure to bear upon their militant colleagues in Orissa. Although they have condemned unjustified violence they have had the audacity to publicly appeal to *“Christians in the area not to inflame local sensitivities by engaging in deceptive and forced conversions.”* To accuse the suffering and persecuted Christians of Orissa of deception and “forced conversions” is dishonest and irresponsible.

Similarly, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (UK), which is the associated organisation of those practising violence in Orissa, is, without any evidence, directly accusing Christian missionary organisations of the murder of their Indian leader. This, also, is totally irresponsible and can only generate hatred, violence and further atrocities. There is widespread concern that Vishwa Hindu Parishad now has branches in Bolton, Ilford, Leicester, Manchester, Newham, Northampton, Nottingham, South London, West Midlands, Wembley, West London, Yorkshire.

Conclusion

The events in Orissa have deeply damaged the good standing of the Republic of India and constitute a grave contravention of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 clearly states *“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance”.*

The Christian community in Orissa have done much to help the poor and needy of this state. They are peaceful and law-abiding. They have never been involved in violent behaviour and they are praying for their persecutors. They now stand in desperate need. Thousands of them are in camps and it is vital that law and order is established as soon as possible. Each day brings further evidence of misery and injustice. There needs to be a far greater sense of urgency among all political leaders, both in India and the United Kingdom.

Millions of Christians worldwide are praying for their brothers and sisters in Orissa and are also pressing political leaders worldwide to help to stop the carnage and desolation without delay.