

LETTER TO PRESIDENT OF INDIA FROM CITIZEN'S DELEGATION

Written by AICC

Monday, 01 September 2008

Following are excerpts from the Citizen's Memorandum to the President of India:

September 1, 2008

Shrimati Pratibha Patil
The President of India

Your Excellency,

You are aware of the still continuing carnage against the Christian community, mostly Dalits and Tribals, in the Kandhamal district of Orissa and in several other districts including the state capital of Bhubaneswar since 23rd August 2003 following the killing of Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati, reportedly by Maoist groups who have been operating in the state for some time. The violence has now spread to some other states, especially Madhya Pradesh.

Nine months after attacks in Kandhamal District on Christians of Dalit, Hill peoples and Tribal ethnicity celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, we are deeply saddened by a repeat of the violence in the month of India's Independence. The Christmas 2007 attacks claimed the lives of at least four Christians, and we verified the destruction of at least 105 churches and 730 Christian homes. The current spate of violence will exceed these totals as it continues to spread into other districts. Our estimate from Ground Zero is of close to two dozen people dead, one a Hindu girl burnt to death working for a Christian orphanage, a Nun has been gang raped, religious men and women personnel humiliated, beaten, tortured, some close to death, while policemen have looked on, or have been absent. We appeal for the restoration of law and order. But the root cause must also be addressed.

We, the secular civil society community, perceive that the great nation of India is at a tipping point. The groups, which favour a "Hindu Rashtra", have made Orissa their laboratory, as they earlier did Gujarat. The so-called saffronisation of the state has been the subject of well-documented academic and socio-political studies. We entreat you, as President of the Republic, to enforce the rule of law upon Sangh Parivar organisations which blatantly flaunt their divisive agenda. Specifically, we call upon you to bring the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, and Bajrang Dal under the rule of law.

As Orissa authorities have repeatedly said there was ample circumstantial evidence of Maoist involvement in the killing of VHP leader Lakshmananada Saraswati and four others on August 23rd. Additionally, someone who identified himself as Azad, a leader of Maoist outfit, People's Liberation Guerrilla Army claim responsibility for the killing as Times of India carries the news on August 30 referring to an interview with a leading Oriya daily on August 29.[1]

Yet Praveen Togadia, VHP general secretary, told an international journalist on August 27, "It is clear that the church killed the Swami." [2] Gouri Prasad Rath, Orissa state VHP secretary, said, "This attack is the handiwork of the Christians." [3] Subhash Chavan, national co-convenor of the Bajrang Dal, said, "The police are trying to hide the truth by blaming the Maoists." [4] An unnamed RSS spokesperson said, "This is an attack by the agents of Christian missionaries, whose attempts at forcible conversions the Swamiji countered." [5] RSS spokesperson Ram Madhav told CNN IBN on Tuesday night [6] that Christians were behind the murders. Perhaps based on a media report [7], Madhav the final word lay with RSS supreme Kupahalli Sudershan who in a Press Statement faxed to the Media called the late VHP vice president a martyr for "stopping Christians from carrying on conversions."

These types of irresponsible statements must be met with the full force of the law. They are all culpable for penal action under IPC 295A for the crime of creating enmity between communities and religions. This would benefit not only Orissa, but the nation.

We sincerely wish Swami Saraswati was not murdered and he still might be alive if the state government had followed the recommendations of the National Commission for Minorities. The NCM urged the authorities to examine the speeches of Swami Lakshmananada to determine whether they amount to incitement to violence. [8] [9] We are confident that, if this had been done, the swami would have been jailed and protected from coming to any harm.

Your Excellency, the violence in Orissa continues without adequate police forces to stop mobs which break curfew and harm innocent civilians, chasing our fellow countrymen and women like animals in the forests where they have taken refuge since August 24. Today the irresponsible leaders of hardliner Hindu nationalist groups are damaging our great democracy and secularism of the nation.

We request you to order the Union Government and the State Administration to take legal action against the irresponsible organisations which called the bundh on Monday, Aug. 25, 2008 and have passively watched their members wreak havoc. They must, of course, fully investigate the murder of the VHP vice president.

This is to request you to use your powers as President of India, and the tremendous force of your good offices, to impress on the Central Government to rush adequate Union forces, including contingents of the Armed Forces if required, to restore law and order and governance in the Kandhamal region.

The consequences of any further delay, we the secular civil society fear, 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.

Yours Sincerely and Most Respectfully,

[The delegation included: Bollywood film producer Mahesh Bhatt, Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Hind President Maulana Mahmood Madani, MP, Orissa Archbishop Raphael Cheenath, National Integration Council member Dr. John Dayal, Delhi Archbishop Vincent Concessao, Maharashtra Government State Minorities Commission vice chairman Dr. Abraham Mathai, Jamiat leader Mohd Faruqi, All India Christian Council regional secretary Rev. Madhu Chandra, Delhi Catholic Archdiocese Federation President Adv. Jenis Francis, and Mumbai's Catholic Social Forum secretary general Joseph Dias]

[1] http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/India/Maoists_claim_Orissa_killing/articleshow/3423908.cms

[2] "Indian state erupts in violence after Hindu shot", by Saeed Ahmed, CNN, Aug. 27, 2008.

[3] "Orissa on edge, VHP scoffs at Maoist theory", see above

[4] "Orissa tragedy takes a backseat, hunt starts for scapegoat", by Soumyajit Pattnaik, Hindustan Times, Aug. 25, 2008.

[5] "Orissa: Bandh-related violence claims 9," by Krishnakumar P., Rediff.com, Aug. 26, 2008.

[6] "Blind Faith? Fragile Peace Blown to Bits", CNN-IBN debate, Aug. 26, 2008, 10 p.m. IST.

[7] "Widespread anger in Kandhamal", The Pioneer, Aug. 25, 2008.

[8] "This mischievous [VHP & Sangh Parivar anti-conversion] campaign has created an atmosphere of prejudice and suspicion against the Christian community and Christian priests and organizations. The role of the Sangh Parivar activists and the anti-conversion campaign in fomenting organized violence against the Christian Community deserves close scrutiny." From "Report of the NCM visit to Orissa, 6-8 January 2008", <http://ncm.nic.in/pdf/orissa%20report.pdf>.

[9] "The recommendation made by the NCM team that visited Orissa in January, 2008 that the State Government must look into the speeches of Swami Lakshmanananda to determine whether they amount to incitement to violence does not appear to have been acted upon." From "Report on the Visit of the Vice Chairperson, NCM to Orissa, 21-24 April 2008", <http://ncm.nic.in/pdf/VC%20Tour%20Report%20of%20Orissa.pdf>.