

September 22, 2008: USCIRF Letter to President Bush Urges Safety for Religious Communities in India

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Contact: Judith Ingram,

Communications
Director,

(202)
523-3240, ext. 127

communications@uscirf.gov

WASHINGTON ‐ The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent, bipartisan federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, sent a letter last Friday to President Bush, urging him to raise pressing concerns about religious freedom in India during his anticipated September 25 meeting with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

in Washington, DC.

As Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer notes in the letter, current violence in the eastern Indian state of Orissa represents the second major outbreak of violence against religious communities in that state in the past ten months. "The U.S. government can and should urge the Indian central government to make more vigorous and effective efforts to stem violence against religious minority communities," says Gaer.

The complete text of the letter follows:

September 19, 2008

The
Honorable George W. Bush

President
of the United States of America

White
House

Washington,
DC 20500

Dear
Mr. President:

As you meet next week with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom respectfully urges you to ask Prime Minister Singh to ensure the immediate security of Indian citizens—security that is undermined by recurrent attacks on religious minorities and communities. If India is to exercise global leadership as the largest and perhaps most pluralistic democracy in the world, Prime Minister Singh should demonstrate his government's commitment to uphold the basic human rights obligations to which it has agreed, including the protection of religious minorities.

Today, according to estimates, thousands of Christians in the eastern state of Orissa are in hiding in jungles and refugee camps as mobs associated with Hindu nationalist organizations continue a three week long series of acts of violence and arson directed against Christian-owned properties, including churches.

These attacks were sparked by the killings last month of a local Hindu leader, Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati and four members of the Vishnu Hindu Parishad (VHP), a Hindu nationalist organization. A Maoist group claimed responsibility in a statement released shortly after the killings occurred, but the VHP has blamed Christians for the deaths—blame that quickly led to retaliatory violence against communities with Christian populations. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has condemned both the killings of the Hindu representatives and the violence that has followed.

The current violence in Orissa represents the second major outbreak of religious violence in Orissa since December, and is estimated to have killed at least 26 individuals, and destroyed about 3,000 Christian homes and 134 places of worship. There are also new reports of attacks against Christians and church properties in several southern states, including Karnataka and Kerala. Last December, both Hindus and Christians in Orissa were killed in mass violence, accompanied by accusations and counter-accusations as to which group initiated the violence.

The Indian government's response to the egregious violence in Orissa remains inadequate. When it was quickly evident that Orissa state police were unable to contain escalating violence in December 2007 and during the current riots, the central government offered assistance at a sluggish rate. The central government has also yet to commit to a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation in the current Orissa violence. Our Commission urges the central government and the National Human Rights Commission and National Commission on Minorities to continue to investigate the violence, issue reports on the status of their investigations, and take further appropriate measures to address the situation, including ensuring that perpetrators of the violence are brought to account. In our view, the severity and extent of these attacks warrant a national-level investigation and response.

We support Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's pledge to offer urgently-needed assistance packages to survivors of the communal riots in Orissa. However, post-riot humanitarian aid does not obscure the need for both the Orissa state and the Indian central government to take action to address persistent sectarian tensions in Orissa, and to prevent future eruptions of violence. We request that you, Mr. President, convey these concerns to the Prime Minister.

Our Commission does

not believe that widespread, violent rioting is an unavoidable by-product of a pluralistic society. The U.S. government can and should urge the Indian central government to make more vigorous and effective efforts to stem violence against religious minority communities. This includes fulfilling a 2004 pledge to criminalize inter-religious violence, and engaging in the preparation and training necessary to ensure that law enforcement officials can quell outbreaks of communal violence effectively. State governments must be held accountable for violence and other unlawful acts that occur in their states.

India already possesses an admirable array of mechanisms to address these ongoing human rights abuses. Independent, non-governmental human rights organizations and a free press report extensively on the growing threats to religious pluralism. The independent Indian judiciary can reform its slow-moving and frequently unresponsive tendencies to hold the perpetrators of religious violence responsible.

This is particularly crucial to address the longstanding injustice endured by victims of another act of severe religious violence. Tens of thousands of Muslims from the western state of Gujarat remain displaced and destitute after Hindu-led riots in 2002 destroyed thousands of homes and businesses and left 2,000 dead. Justice for victims remains stalled; there have been few court convictions in the six years since the religion-based riots occurred.

The tentative, halted response of India's central government to the current religious violence in Orissa and the ongoing lack of justice for the victims of the Gujarat riots of 2002 enhance the uncertainty and insecurity facing minorities. India has also already been the victim of so much terrorism on its soil, most recently with the bombings in Delhi this past weekend, linked to Islamic extremists. Both of our countries are joined in the battle against elements of extremism originating from religious communities.

Mr. President, you are in the unique position to be able to communicate to the Prime Minister the urgency of employing prompt and effective preventive means to quell the ongoing communal violence, and insuring accountability of the perpetrators.

At stake is the security and success of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual society of more than a billion people that shares the democratic values of the United States and boasts the vibrant representation of all the world's major religions. India is the birthplace of Buddhism, the current home to the Tibetan government-in-exile, and even its small Jewish population has lived without persecution.

In this majority Hindu country with one of the world's largest Muslims populations, the current Prime Minister is Sikh and the national governing alliance is headed by a Catholic. India recognizes Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Zoroastrian holidays as public holidays. Against this pluralistic backdrop, religious violence in Gujarat, Orissa, and elsewhere are particularly unacceptable.

Sincerely,

Felice D. Gaer

Chair

cc: Steven J.
Hadley, National Security Advisor

Michael Kozak, Senior Director for
Democracy, Human Rights, and International

Operations,
National Security Council

Dennis C. Wilder, Senior Director for Asian Affairs,
National Security Council

Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of
State

William J. Burns, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs

Paula J. Dobriansky, Undersecretary of State for Global
Affairs

Richard A. Boucher, Assistant Secretary of State for
South and Central Asian Affairs

David J.
Kramer, Assistant
Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and

Labor

John V. Hanford

III, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom