

National Integration Council

Government of India

13 October 2008

Joint Statement by Christian Members:

Archbishop Vincent Concessao, Archbishop of Delhi
Dr John Dayal, Secretary General, All India Christian Council
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Mr Prime Minister and Honourable Members of the National Integration Council, We stand before you as Indian citizens professing the Christian faith. We bring you greetings from a community traumatised and struggling for its existence in the state of Orissa, and buffeted by senseless and motivated violence in eight other states of this wonderful country which is not only our beloved motherland, but is one of the first homelands of the Christian Faith in the world.

We feel it is a tragedy that the National Integration Council has met so rarely since the Honourable Prime Minister reconstituted it some years ago. As the highest national body of its kind outside the formal structure of Parliament, it could perhaps have been the forum to discuss solutions to the many incendiary issues that have ravaged our nation in recent times. There could have been solutions found, we dare say, in discussions unshackled by political whips and other agendas. Patently, Government must ensure that the NIC becomes a useful instrument in the continuing process of preserving and strengthening national integration.

For us, the threat has never been solely against the Christian community, its major victims though we are in recent months.

We know to our pain that for all practical purposes, Kandhamal district in Orissa seems not to be a part of India, as police and paramilitary could not enter it for weeks. The Indian Constitution remained operative. The National Commission for Minorities in earlier two visits in 2007 and a recent visit in August – September 2008 gave clear findings about ineffectiveness of local police and administration, and even suggested connivance, in the carnage.

The threat, therefore, is posed to the very Idea of India, as Jawaharlal Nehru would have said, to the Writ of the Constitution, to the rule of law. The Prime Minister has correctly called the horrific events in Orissa a National Shame. They are a slur on our ancient civilisation, our collective heritage. They are also cognizable crimes.

Honourable Members,

Even as we meet here today, the embers still smoke in the ruins of more than 4,300 houses and 157 Churches burnt in the Kandhamal and 13 other districts of Orissa. In a meticulously planned and executed conspiracy, a frenzied and well armed band of political criminals has threatened our community as perhaps it has never been in its 2,000 year old history in India, one of the earliest homelands of the faith.

We face a trial by gun, sword, fire and rapine, tantamount to ethnic cleansing. Over 50,000 who were forcibly purged from 300 villages now hide in forests as Internally Displaced persons, or cower in Government refugee camps in sub human conditions. They have been given a simple option – Convert to Hinduism or die.

The elements threatening them now, and who murdered 59 of them in 45 days, have been identified as – and have often come before Television camera to in macabre boast -- members of the Bajrang Dal and its sister organisations. They say it is their revenge for the killing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad vice president Lakhmanananda Saraswati on 23 August 2008. The Church condemned the murder unequivocally and called for a high powered enquiry. The guilty must be traced, arrested, tried and punished -- whatever is their religion, or ideology. The Maoists have given TV interviews accepting responsibility for the assassination. The State police have said it is the work of the Maoists.

And yet a Nun has been gang-raped, many men and women burnt alive or hacked to death. A strange retribution against an innocent people. We fear it is a conspiracy to polarise communities along religious divides in areas which had been peaceful through the decades.

The Sangh Parivar claims the violence is against forcible and fraudulent conversions to Christianity. We denounce forcible and fraudulent conversions. They would, by definition, be illegal, immoral, unethical, and against the Teachings of Faith. Five decades of Church documents, Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical, testify to this. Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit. Repeated exercises by the National Minorities Commission and efforts by aggressive Governments have failed to provide a single proven case of forcible or fraudulent for forcible conversion. And yet State guarantees on Freedom of Faith, including the propagation of faith, and human rights are smothered in calls for moratoriums and black laws, and brutalised in police harassment.

Honourable Prime Minister and Members,

This violence must cease forthwith. Our people must be allowed to return home in peace in Kandhamal and in other districts of Orissa. We must be allowed to profess our faith in honour without fear, and without the sword of forcible conversions and the so called Ghar-wapsi, at our throat. This is what the Constitution assures us. We seek no more.

It is for the Law to take action against the guilty. We, as always, forgive our tormentors. This is our creed, a part of our daily prayers.

Experts, however, have suggested remedies that are available to the Union Government and the State.

The Fifth Schedule in the Constitution "Provisions as to the administration and control of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes" gives extensive rights to the Governor of the state. It also enjoins upon the governor the right to maintain law and order in scheduled areas.

The final word on subject of tackling communal riots should be left to the Honourable Supreme Court. [para 9- Legalpundits' Citation : LIS/SC/2008/826 - Harendra Sarkar Vs. State of Assam, [Alongwith Criminal Appeal No. 1068 of 2006] - May 2 2008—“ 9. The matter does not end with the reports of the judicial

commissions alone but has been a matter of deep concern for the administration as well. The First National Police Commission headed by Shri Dharam Vira ICS (Retd.) in Volume VI, Chapter XLVII, Page 9 dealing with 'communal riots' of the report reads thus: - The investigation of crimes recorded is a matter which calls for professional skill and expertise of a different variety. Investigations of crimes cannot be undertaken in moments of tension and confusion. The National Integration Council has observed that special investigation squads should be set up to investigate crimes committed in the course of serious riots. We endorse this observation and recommend that such squads should be set up under the State Investigating agency [State CID (Crime)] to investigate all crimes committed in the course of a riot.

The Supreme Court had commended the role of the National Integration Council set up by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. We must, today, redeem that pledge. Other urgent steps that have long been kept in cold storage are;

1. Stern action against hate Crimes. Hate campaigns are the incubators of communal violence.
2. Enacting of the Communal Violence Bill ensuring that it takes care of the concerns of the Christian community and does not further arm communal administrations or further emboldens impunity of communalised police elements.
3. Comprehensive relief and rehabilitation policies that wipe the tear from the eyes of victims of communal violence and give them the opportunity of creating a new life.
4. Adequate representation to all minorities and underprivileged groups in the Police, Administrative and judicial systems.
5. A thorough revamp of the education system, including a close watch on the recent rash of communally motivated village and rural schools set up by political groups, so that once again secularism, religious and cultural diversity and pluralism become the cornerstone of our nation-building.
6. Above all, the State – Parliament, Supreme Court, and Executive – must ensure that no one remains under the illusion, unfortunately very well founded at present, that communal politics, hate and the demonization of religious minorities can bring them electoral dividends in an India of the Twenty-first Century.

Sir,

The current violence against us is the uppermost in our mind. But we three would be failing our community if we do not refer to some other major issues that are whittling away at our Constitutional rights, and have stressed our people.

1. The issue of Dalit Christians: The Government has shown scant respect for the reports of various National Commissions commending that Christians of Dalit origin be granted the same Constitutional rights as Dalits professing other faiths. This delay, in fact, fuels the communal violence against the Christian community in various states.
2. Economic Development of the Christian community: There are a few islands of prosperity, but the vast majority of Indian Christians are Dalit, landless farmers, even manual labour. Many live below the poverty line. Many, specially women in tribal areas, remain uneducated. The Government appointed the Justice Rajender Sachhar Commission for Muslims and has acted with alacrity on its

recommendations. We welcome that. We demand a similar commission and similar steps for the poor and the underdeveloped in the Christian Community.

3. Our Constitutional right to profess and propagate our faith has been severely restricted. By restraining the freedom of Propagation, we fear the attempt is to make Christianity a religion that can devolve only by birth. This violates national and international guarantees by taking away free choice of the citizen. Added to this is police interference with home worship and smaller church groups.
4. State and local laws have severely restrained out educational activities, specially for the poor. Government land is increasingly becoming unavailable to the social sector, and seems reserved for private business. English medium schools for Dalit children are now impossible in several states. Despite court decisions, there is increasing interference and erosion of Article 30 assurances. These must end.

PART II

Our response to other Items on the NIC Agenda:

1. SOCIAL STRUCTURE – Caste and Identity divisions and rhetoric:

We hold caste to be an affront and an insult to human dignity. Untouchability has been outlawed, but is practiced openly in most states, specially in villages. Caste remains an ugly reality. It permeates administrative and police structures and is reflected in police atrocities. There seems to be swift retribution against social sector efforts to empower Dalits.

We hold every man and women to be made by God in His own image. Jesus died on the Cross to make this a reality for us.

2. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT -- Equitable development and removal of regional imbalances:

Justice Krishna Iyer famously said “In an obsession with the billionaires, we are forgetting the Billions [of poor of India]”. The Prime Minister has often spoken of the Human face of development. This Human face has been woefully missing. The suicides by farmers, the growth of disillusionment among poor youth and their gravitation to extremism, economically driven crime in urban areas by people seeking a ‘good life’ are warning posts we cannot afford to ignore. The government’s single minded focus must be on equitable distribution of the fruits of development beginning with the very basics – food, water, a roof over the head, education for the children, and primary health.

3. Promotion of Feeling of Security among minorities and other vulnerable sections:
Minorities seem to be directly isolated as if part of a design and State and Media have both acquiesced in this. Terrorism should not be defined by the religion of the criminal, but by identifying the person who commits the crime. India unfortunately turns a blind eye to hate campaigns, especially those sustained against the Muslim and Christian Communities. This has led to the demonization of communities, making them vulnerable in many ways. The government and society must show uncompromising commitment to the rule of law. There must a response mechanism, an early warning system, a rapid action force and strategy to nip communal mischief in the bud. The minorities must be able to see their face in every edifice and branch of the state, in every instrument of power – Judiciary, Administration, and police.
State culpability must be addressed honestly. Police impunity must be ended. We regret the guilty of most communal riots, and especially those of 1984 anti Sikh violence, the 1993 and 2002 anti Muslim violence and other incidents remain unpunished.

4. Education – Promotion of Education among Minorities, Scheduled castes and scheduled Tribes

The state must reclaim its role in the education system which it has ceded to private and big business. Rural education must be closely monitored; text material, pedagogy and personnel must be screened to ensure there is no hate taught to the young Indian citizen.

5. Communal Harmony: we are a harmonious people. Level play grounds, equal opportunities, if through law such as the creation of an Equal Opportunities Commission, and close monitoring of development plans and law and order will go a long way in reassuring the communities. Subordinate and grassroots structures, peace committees, consultations can only help in this dialogue of life.

Thank you.

THE TOLL ANTI-CHRISTIAN VIOLENCE

24 August – 9 October 2008

1. ORISSA

	14	Districts hit
	300	Villages destroyed
	4,400	Houses burnt
	50,000	Homeless
	59	People murdered
	10	
	Fathers/Pastors/Nuns injured	
2	Women gang-rapes confirmed [One Nun]	
	18,000	Men, women, children
injured		
	151	Churches destroyed
	13	Schools, colleges
destroyed		

2. KARNATAKA

	7	Districts
affected		
	33	Churches
attacked		

injured	20	Nuns, women
3. KERALA		
damaged	3	Churches
4. MADHYA PRADESH		
	4	Churches damaged
5. DELHI		
	1	Church destroyed
	4	Attempts made
6. TAMIL NADU	4	Churches attacked
7. UTTARAKHAND	2	murdered – aged priest and
employee		