

Sept. 3, 2008: India: USCIRF Urges Decisive Action by Central Government to Stop Communal Violence in Orissa

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WASHINGTON—The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom calls on the U.S. Department of State to urge the Indian government to take immediate steps to quell the violence against religious communities in the state of Orissa, which has claimed at least 20 lives, and to implement reforms at the central level to insure prompt investigation of and accountability for these attacks. The recent, continuing attacks, largely targeting Christians, represent the second major outbreak of religious violence in Orissa since December, which underlines the pressing need for the government to develop preventive strategies.

“The reported acts of violence represent a troubling pattern of severe abuses in Orissa,” stated Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. “Both the state and central governments have a responsibility to protect every person’s right to religious freedom, including members of religious minorities, as guaranteed in international human rights instruments.”

The latest violence, which erupted last month, was precipitated by the killings of a local leader and four other members of the Vishnu Hindu Parishad (VHP), a Hindu nationalist group. A Maoist group claimed responsibility for the killings in a statement released over the weekend, but the VHP accuses local Christians of responsibility for the deaths. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom condemns both the killings of the Hindu representatives and the violence that has followed.

According to news reports, at least 20 people have already been killed, including pastors and nuns, in what has been framed as “retaliatory violence” against Christians, and over 500 homes and at least 17 churches and prayer houses have been destroyed in rioting. At least 10,000 Christians, reportedly including Catholics, Baptists, Lutherans, Adventists, and others, have been forced to flee their homes, and the actual number may be even higher. The state government’s imposition of a state-wide curfew and deployment of police forces have failed to quell the ongoing violence targeting the Christian minority. An additional 80 homes were reportedly destroyed on Tuesday.

The Commission supports Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's pledge to offer urgently-needed assistance packages to survivors of the communal riots. 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.

Following the outbreak of Hindu-Christian violence in Orissa in December 2007, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom supported the National Commission on Human Rights sending a team to investigate the violence. USCIRF now calls on the State Department to urge the central government and its Human Rights and Minority Commissions to continue their investigations, 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.

"Because of the size and repeated nature of these attacks, these matters should not be left in the hands of state officials alone," Gaer said. "The central government needs to be involved as the severity and extent of these attacks warrant a national-level investigation and response."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom condemned the December 2007 violence in Orissa and noted with concern allegations that the police had not responded adequately to calls for help. A January 2008 report by the National Commission on Minorities also underscored the need to increase the size of the understaffed police forces, and to improve the police training and equipment available in Orissa.

"The current conflict demonstrates that the Orissa state government has again failed to protect the members of religious minorities," said Gaer. "The Commission calls on the U.S. government to 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."