NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Pope appeals for harmony in violence torn India

UCA News | Aug. 28, 2008

ROME -- Pope Benedict XVI has appealed to India's religious and civil authorities "to work together" to restore "peaceful coexistence and harmony" in the wake of anti-Christian violence in Orissa state.

On Aug. 28, speaking in the Vatican to thousands of pilgrims from around the world at the end of his weekly public audience, the pope strongly condemned the violence and expressed his personal solidarity with the suffering Christians.

The Holy Father said he had "learned with deep sadness" about the violence "which erupted following the deplorable murder of the Hindu leader Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati." In that violence, he continued, "some persons have been killed and others injured," while "worship centers, Church property and private houses have also been destroyed."

"While I firmly condemn all attacks against human life, the sacredness of which demands the respect of all, I express my spiritual closeness and solidarity to the brothers and sisters in the faith so sorely tried," the pope declared.

Then he prayed for the Christians in Orissa: "I implore the Lord to accompany and support them in this time of suffering and give strength to continue in the service of love in favor of all."

He concluded with an appeal to India's "religious leaders and civil authorities," asking them "to work together to restore among the members of the various communities the peaceful coexistence and harmony which have always been the distinguishing mark of the Indian society."

Hindu extremists began attacking Christians in Orissa after blaming them for the killing of Swami Saraswati and five of his associates on Aug. 23. Maoists reportedly claimed responsibility for the killings. An earlier wave of anti-Christian violence had swept through some of the same areas of Orissa last Christmas.

On Aug. 27, the Holy See Press Office issued a statement strongly condemning the violence -- which an Indian bishops' conference spokesperson says has caused the death of at least 14 people, most of them Christians -- and expressed solidarity with the dioceses and Religious congregations in Orissa.

On the same day, the Vatican also revealed that Cardinal Jean Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, had called on the international community to pressure the Indian government to ensure that the provisions in the Indian Constitution on religious freedom are fully respected.

Apostolic Nuncio to India Archbishop Pedro Lopez Quintana, in comments to Vatican Radio, said Hindu fundamentalists are trying to impose a Hindu state on the entire population.

Hinduism is the main religion in India, which has 1.1 billion people. The 2001 national census estimated that Hindus formed 80.5 percent of the population. Muslims and Christians, at 13.4 percent and 2.3 percent of the

population, respectively, formed the largest religious minority communities. Hindu nationalists often accuse Christian missioners of luring poor people away from Hinduism through bribes or coercion, an allegation the Churches have denied.

Archbishop Lopez Quintana told Vatican Radio: "Behind this violence (against Christians) there are fundamentalist groups linked to ideologies of a Nazi matrix. Their scope is to impose a fundamentalist state, and in certain states they have found a favorable situation, and it is from there that the violence spreads."

He added, "The fundamentalists use an ideology with a Nazi, totalitarian foundation, and religion is used as an instrument of manipulation."

The nuncio elaborated that the fundamentalists try to convince other Hindus that Christianity is a foreign ideology and that newly converted Christians, financially supported by foreign organizations, will take their jobs. The simple people can "be manipulated easily" by the fundamentalists, he observed.

Nonetheless, the Vatican diplomat said he is not fearful for the future, in spite of the violence and this fundamentalist antagonism. "Hope is a reality that exists in India, because dialogue and coexistence are part of the reality of Indian society," he explained.

Archbishop Lopez Quintana added that he is confident this crisis too will be overcome, as was the one last Christmas.

Source URL (retrieved on *04/17/2014 - 05:16*): http://ncronline.org/news/pope-appeals-harmony-violence-torn-india