

Church Blames Federal Inaction For Anti-Christian Violence

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Catholic leaders have blamed the federal government for failing to act in time to end anti-Christian violence that has killed at least 25 people in Orissa state, eastern India.

"Had the federal government acted in time, so many lives would not have been lost," says Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil of Ernakulam-Angamaly, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India. He blames the federal coalition, led by the Congress party, for failing to intervene effectively and contain the violence.

"It is the duty" of the federal government to act when "a state government fails to protect the lives and property of citizens," the Church leader told a rally of about 5,000 Catholics on Aug. 31 in Kochi, base of his archdiocese and commercial capital of Kerala state, southern India, 2,595 kilometers south of New Delhi.

"Each citizen of our country has the right to practice his religion," Cardinal Vithayathil said at the rally, one of several programs the Kerala Church organized to express solidarity with victims of the Orissa violence. Catholic parishes in all 26 dioceses across the state organized prayer meetings for the victims.

The violence in Orissa continued unabated for seven days starting on Aug. 23. It began after the killing of a Hindu religious leader and five associates in Orissa's Kandhamal district. Maoists reportedly claimed responsibility for the killings. Hindu radicals however allege gunmen hired by Christians murdered their spiritual leader, a charge all Christian groups have denied. The 85-year-old Hindu leader, based in Kandhamal, had for several decades opposed conversions to Christianity.

As the violence intensified across the state, armed Hindu fanatics unleashed mayhem, torching houses, convents, hostels and presbyteries. The violence killed at least 25 people and destroyed some 4,000 homes.

Churches across India plan to observe Sunday Sept. 7 as Communal Amity Day, with special prayers for peace and harmony, following a call from the bishops' conference.

Church people in Madhya Pradesh, a central Indian state, also accused the Congress party of not acting to protect the freedom and rights of citizens.

As a mark of protest, Isai Mahasang (greater Christian forum) in the state organized a rally of some 1,000 people on Aug. 31 in the state capital of Bhopal, 745 kilometers south of New Delhi. People traveled in cars and jeeps, minibuses and about 100 two-wheelers, covering a distance of three kilometers from the city square to the Congress party's state unit office.

Their memorandum, addressed to Congress president Sonia Gandhi, urged her to ask federal officials to protect Christians' life and property. Gandhi is also chairperson of the ruling federal coalition, the United Progressive Alliance.

Had the federal government taken a firm stand when the violence broke out, it would not have escalated, Father Anand Muttungal, spokesperson of the Catholic Church in Madhya Pradesh, told UCA News.

He said the rally and the memorandum were a "wake-up call to the Congress party, which proclaims itself as the well-wisher of the minorities, to act and prove its love for minorities."

Sheela Santiago, an Isai Mahasang leader, said the party "only shed crocodile tears" and "did practically nothing" to stop the violence.

John Anthony, Bhopal district president of Isai Mahasang, shares that view. The Congress has been trying to appease the majority communities "at the cost of the minorities," he said.

However, the state's Congress general secretary, Rajiv Singh, denied these allegations. He told UCA News his party has "always been favoring (religious) minorities and taking up their issues in right earnest."

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