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Indian Catholic leaders speak of conspiracy behind violence

Anto Akkara Catholic News Service | Sep. 24, 2008

BANGALORE, India -- Church officials and others say there is a "clear conspiracy" behind the sudden upsurge in the atrocities committed against Christian targets in different parts of India.

"We are really distressed to see that atrocities on Christians are being reported from different parts of the country on a daily basis," Divine Word Father Babu Joseph, spokesman for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, told Catholic New Service.

Though some of the attacks look sporadic, with incidents reported from different areas, Father Joseph pointed out that "there is a clear conspiracy to terrorize the Christian community behind these attacks."

"It is not in Orissa or in Karnataka (states) alone. See the dreadful reports we are getting from Dehra Dun and Jabalpur," said Father Joseph, whose telephone hardly stops ringing with frequent calls for reaction from journalists.

St. Peter and Paul Cathedral of the Jabalpur Diocese in central Madhya Pradesh state was set on fire Sept. 18 by Hindu fundamentalists.

At a hermitage near Dehra Dun in northern Uttarakhand state, Father Francis Samuel of the Meerut Diocese was found murdered Sept. 22. The priest had been strangled to death and the tabernacle was desecrated at the hermitage where he lived. A Catholic woman visitor to the hermitage was found dead in the storeroom, her head smashed with a stone.

Media reported that Hindu fundamentalists had earlier threatened the priest and told him to remove the cross installed at the hermitage's gate.

The incidents were among dozens of atrocities since Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, leader of Hindu nationalist groups in Orissa, was shot dead by Maoist rebels Aug. 23.

"I publicly say we are deeply hurt. The church in Karnataka is wounded," Archbishop Bernard Moras of Bangalore, chairman of the Karnataka Catholic Bishops' Council, told the state's chief minister, B.S. Yeddyurappa, Sept. 22.

Archbishop Moras spoke after the head of the Karnataka state government visited his office following unprecedented violence against Christians.

"There is no point in keeping quiet. We have to speak up now," Archbishop Moras told CNS.

"There is surely a conspiracy to terrorize the Christians," he added.

John Dayal, spokesman for and former president of the All India Catholic Union, told CNS that the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party was the "brain behind" the relentless attacks.

"With an eye on the next (national) election, the BJP is trying to trigger polarization of majority Hindu voters to its side with these attacks," said Dayal.

Most of the attacks on Christians, he said, have been reported from BJP-ruled states such as Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh; the party is part of the ruling coalition in Orissa.

"Fortunately, the Christian youth have resisted the insidious plan to provoke them to retaliate and clash with the Hindus. That would have been disastrous for us (Christians)," said Dayal.

His view was endorsed by R.B. Sreekumar, a Hindu and former inspector general of police in western Gujarat state. Sreekumar addressed a news conference in Bangalore Sept. 20 after a fact-finding visit to Mangalore, along the west coast of Karnataka.

Instead of arresting the culprits, he said, the police cracked down on the Christian protesters in Mangalore, dragging women and children from churches and beating them.

"The police will not act like this unless they have been given clear instructions," Sreekumar told CNS.

Mahesh Bhatt, a Hindu and a prominent film producer, said at the press conference that nuns injured in Mangalore told the fact-finding team: "Please tell the world we forgive those who attacked us. We want peace in this country."

"As citizens of this country, we have a duty to stand up and protect such noble souls," Bhatt told the press conference.

Since mid-August, more than three dozen Christians have been killed; 4,200 Christian houses along with dozens of churches and Christian institutions have been looted and burned. Roving mobs of Hindu extremists forced Christians to convert to Hinduism, and more than half of the 100,000 Christians in Orissa's Kandhamal district have become refugees in jungles or 14 relief camps run by the government.

On Sept. 14, the Hindu fundamentalist group Bajrang Dal attacked more than a dozen churches of different denominations in and around Mangalore. The following week, 15 more churches in the state were desecrated, and reports of church desecrations have come in from other states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

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