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

Former premier joins protest against anti-Christian violence

UCA News | Sep. 27, 2008

NEW DELHI -- Former Indian prime minister H.D. Deve Gowda sat by the side of a busy New Delhi road on Sept. 23 protesting anti-Christian violence in India.

After the three-hour sit-in, the 75-year-old Gowda visited Archbishop Vincent Concessao of Delhi and senior priests at the Archbishop's House in the capital to express solidarity with them. "I will stand by you. I will fight with all sincerity to protect minority rights and interests," he told them.

Protection of religious minorities "is of paramount importance in a secular and democratic" India, he said, noting that the nation's constitution guarantees respect for "all the religions."

Gowda began to publicly protest the violence after Hindu fanatics attacked 15 churches and prayer halls Sept. 14-15 in his native Karnataka state, southern India. Three more churches were attacked there on Sept. 21.

These attacks came on the heels of anti-Christian violence in Orissa state, eastern India, that has claimed at least 33 lives, and destroyed thousands of homes and scores of Church institutions. Sporadic violence continues there with some 50,000 fearful people living either in refugee camps or forests.

During the sit-in, Gowda released a letter he wrote to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in which he stated, "Violence and attacks on innocent people, irrespective of their religious beliefs, have to be condemned in all its manifestations."

People in Karnataka, he said, live "under the shadow of terror with a callous and indifferent state government turning a blind eye to acts of brutality, vandalism, violence and mayhem being perpetrated" by Hindu radical groups. "Karnataka has today emerged as the worst terror and communal hub among all the southern states," he lamented in the letter.

Atrocities against the "hapless Christian community" have been "nothing short of criminal conspiracy," he asserted, adding that fanatic groups often "defend these attacks on the ground of alleged proselytizing" by Christians.

Gowda urged the prime minister to ban Bajrang Dal (party of the strong and stout), a group blamed for anti-Christian violence.

The former prime minister argued in his letter that this group has been carrying out a "sustained hate campaign" and violence against religious minorities not only in Orissa and Karnataka, but also in other states such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat that the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian people's party) governs.

The BJP, which headed the previous federal government and now rules several Indian states either directly or, as in the case of Orissa, as a major partner in the ruling coalition, is considered the standard-bearer of groups

such as the Bajrang Dal that want to turn India into a Hindu theocracy.

"Terrorists of all hues and shades are undoubtedly merchants of death" and cannot be excused just because they chant patriotic slogans and respect a national flag, he wrote.

On the other hand, he noted the "minuscule Christian community," which forms about 2.3 percent of 1.1 billion people in India, has "done yeomen service to the nation in the field of health and education."

Gowda was Indian prime minister from June 1996 until his resignation in April 1997, when the fragile coalition he headed fell apart less than a year after it came to power.

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Source URL (retrieved on *12/09/2013 - 04:40*): http://ncronline.org/news/former-premier-joins-protest-against-anti-christian-violence