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In India, thousands rally to end anti-Christian violence

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NEW DELHI -- Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs marched with about 10,000 Christians in the Indian capital on Oct. 2 to protest continuing anti-Christian violence.

The day marked Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary, which the world observes as International Peace Day.

The marchers released a memorandum addressed to Gandhi expressing anguish and pain at continuing attacks on Christians, especially in Orissa, an eastern Indian state.

India reveres Gandhi (1869-1948), who successfully led its independence struggle, as the "apostle of nonviolence" and father of the nation.

Leaders from various religions, including Catholic bishops, led the march holding banners that pleaded for an end to violence. About 100 motorcyclists rode ahead of the rally.

"Stop killing Christians!" protesters shouted in Hindi as hundreds of onlookers watched the march through New Delhi's busiest streets. "Allow us to live!" was another chant, as was "India is yours and mine, not anyone's father's."

Most wore black armbands or had pinned black badges to their clothes. Many youngsters were dressed in T-shirts with slogans such as "Jesus our savior" and "Jesus loves you."

The march started at 2 p.m. after a public meeting at Jantar Mantar, a downtown area designated for demonstrations, near the Indian parliament building. It ended three hours later with children joining religious leaders to offer floral tribute at the Gandhi mausoleum about five kilometers away.

The march concluded a seven-day sit-in protest Christians organized with secular and human rights activists at Jantar Mantar.

Federal ministers, political leaders, human rights activists and victims of anti-Christian violence addressed the people gathered there prior to the march.

Railway Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav promised to take up the grievances of Christians at a Cabinet meeting scheduled for Oct. 3. The federal minister blamed Hindu radical groups for the violence.

Teesta Setalvad, a social activist and a Hindu, said she regretted the same forces that killed Gandhi continue to disrupt peace and social order in the country. A Hindu extremist assassinated Gandhi on Jan. 30, 1948.

Setalvad enumerated various incidents of anti-Christian violence in India and urged the country's middle class to speak up. She said middle-class people have benefited greatly from services offered by Christians but remain silent when their benefactors are attacked.

Swami Agnivesh, a Hindu reformist leader who addressed a prayer meeting near the Gandhi mausoleum, decried those who have killed Christians and raped nuns as the "biggest enemies" of God. He blamed Gandhi's killers as the ones behind the attacks on Christians in Orissa.

Several marchers told UCA News they expected the rally to impress upon authorities the need to take firm action to end attacks on Christians.

Archbishop Vincent Concessao of Delhi said he wants the federal government to take control. "We want the government to establish peace in Orissa," he said.

Another participant, Sister Sheeba said she regretted the government had done little to control the violence. "I hope the rally and the dharna (sit-in protest) would at least open the eyes of the government," the Franciscan Clarist nun said.

Bishop Joseph Mar Bernabas of the Mar Thoma Church asserted the government cannot go on ignoring Christians even though they are a minority. "We are part of the nation," he said. "We love our country."

The peaceful rally reaffirmed Christians as a peace-loving community, said Father Jayan Thomas of the same Church, an offshoot of the Orthodox Church.

A young Catholic protester, Deepti Jasmin Xalxo, said she joined the rally to show solidarity with "our suffering brethren," while Pastor S.K. Suman of an independent Church likewise said the protest offered Christians an opportunity to tell the world they are united with the suffering people.

The Orissa violence began on Aug. 24, a day after a Hindu leader who opposed conversions to Christianity and four of his associates were killed. A Maoist group claimed responsibility for the killings, but Hindu radical groups have blamed the murder on Christians. In the past six weeks, they have burned down 4,500 houses, 100 churches, and 20 convents, presbyteries and other Church institutions. At least 52 deaths have been confirmed.

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