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Indian cardinal criticizes report on church attacks

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BANGALORE, India -- The president of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India added his voice to the rising tide of critics of a controversial report that cleared Hindu fundamentalists, police and local government leaders of a series of attacks on Christian targets in September 2008.

Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Mumbai flayed the report Feb. 23 for failing "to identify persons and organizations" involved in the attacks despite the testimony of dozens of witnesses who identified individual perpetrators who took part in the incidents in southern Karnataka state.

The report by a commission, chaired by retired Judge B.K. Somasekhara and appointed by the Karnataka government, had "hurt our religious sentiments by its uncalled-for remarks and exoneration of the fundamentalist forces," the cardinal said.

Churches, Christian groups and various church leaders, including Catholic bishops, have led public protests calling upon the Indian government to conduct its own inquiry into the attacks since the commission's report was given to the Indian government Jan. 28.

"This is bad for the judiciary and the country," Cardinal Gracias told Catholic News Service from Mumbai, where he received the report the previous day from retired Judge Michael F. Saldana, a Catholic.

"When such an important inquiry connives with the culprits instead of identifying and isolating them, it shatters the confidence of the (religious) minorities," Cardinal Gracias said.

However, Cardinal Gracias added, "it is a good sign that even the media and non-Christians have realized this whitewashing" of the attacks on Christians.

Saldana said he conducted his own investigation into the attacks on behalf of People's Union for Civil Liberties and Transparency International and discovered the incidents were "pre-planned" and sponsored by the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party, known as BJP, which rules Karnataka.

Saldana told CNS that the "the interim report of the Somasekhara Commission was rather impartial and many had welcomed it."

"But the Commission took a U-turn and seemed to have decided to shield the culprits including the BJP government for its connivance in the violence," explained Saldana, who was senior to Somasekhara in Karnataka high court.

That was after the government threatened to scrap the inquiry commission, he said.

Apart from the Mangalore attacks, Saldana said that Karnataka has reported more than 1,000 attacks on Christian targets in recent years.

"I feel sad that a judicial colleague of mine did this whitewashing," Saldana said. "The credibility of the country and inquiry commissions is at stake. Mistakes have to be rectified."

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