

India Catholics worry anti-Christian violence could spread

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AMBIKAPUR, India

Dioceses in Chhattisgarh state, which borders violence-wracked Orissa, have decided to organize themselves against possible violence by Hindu extremists.

Starting on Aug. 24, seven weeks of anti-Christian violence in Orissa, West Bengal's southern neighbor, claimed at least 58 lives, mostly Christians, and displaced about 50,000 Christians. Mobs destroyed 4,500 houses along with about 100 churches, institutions and convents.

Now laypeople including youths have taken up the responsibility of guarding churches and institutions in Ambikapur and Jashpur dioceses, said Bishop Patras Minj of Ambikapur. "So far no untoward incident has happened," the Jesuit bishop told UCA News on Oct. 10. No violence has been reported since then either.

The dioceses are close to Orissa state, Chhattisgarh's neighbor, where anti-Christian violence beginning in late August killed at least 58 people and rendered about 50,000 people homeless. Hindu extremists burned down 4,500 houses, convents, presbyteries and other Church institutions during the seven-week pogrom.

Father Emmanuel Kerketta, Jashpur diocesan administrator, told UCA News groups of laypeople are guarding churches in the diocese, where most of the 200,000 Catholics are Oraon tribal people.

At the cathedral in Jashpur, 1,640 kilometers southeast of New Delhi, Father John Beck said that although police protect his parish around the clock, about 30 laypeople come daily from villages to guard the church. The 900 Catholic families in the parish come from some 25 villages, and there is no fear among Catholics in the villages, he added.

Francis Tigga, who heads the diocese's Catholic Sabha (assembly), based at the cathedral, said parishioners have decided to immediately telephone news of an untoward incident. Moreover, each family is to keep a whistle to alert neighbors of any attack, and the church bell will be rung in such an event to gather people. Instead of fleeing in the face of an anti-Christian onslaught, villagers have decided to face it head-on, he said.

At the Ambikapur cathedral, parishioners met recently and decided to form vigilance groups in each of the parish's 23 villages to protect Christians, their homes and Church institutions, said Father Deonis Xaxa, the parish priest. His parish in Ambikapur, 1,300 kilometers southeast of New Delhi, has approximately 15,000 members.

Leaders from the various villages will take turns guarding Church institutions, Father Xaxa added. Some of them will also sit outside the cathedral during Mass to keep an eye on visitors.

In a meeting on Oct. 11, Ambikapur parish youth selected four leaders from each village to guard churches and Christians.

Arvind Xalxo, youth leader for the cathedral parish, told UCA News they need to make people "aware of the happenings" in Orissa, since many do not realize the intensity of the violence that occurred there. "Unless they are informed, they will not come forward," he said, adding that he wanted to meet with youths from other Christian denominations for greater cooperation.

Rajesh Toppo, a catechist from Ambikapur, cautioned: "The Hindu organization is strong. We have not yet organized ourselves."

Justin Bara, 26, also from Ambikapur, was hoping to organize a team of young people to go to Orissa to study facts of the violence. He told UCA News he wanted to collect money and relief aid to help the needy there.

Anto Pangadan, a member of the Jesus Youth group, which conducts leadership training for young people in Ambikapur, said many young people are angry at the atrocities in Orissa. The violence has helped them come together to protect the church and Christians, he said. "It is good that the Church is organizing the youth," he told UCA News.

Representatives of clergy and Religious in Ambikapur, during a meeting in September, urged Catholics to maintain healthy relations with their neighbors and avoid hurting or offending the religious sentiments of those professing other religions.

Sister Neel Mani, who works at the diocese's Sur mission station, said Hindu neighbors there have assured them of protection in the event of any attack. She said police have also assured them of assistance.

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