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Peaceful Christmas relieves Orissa Christians

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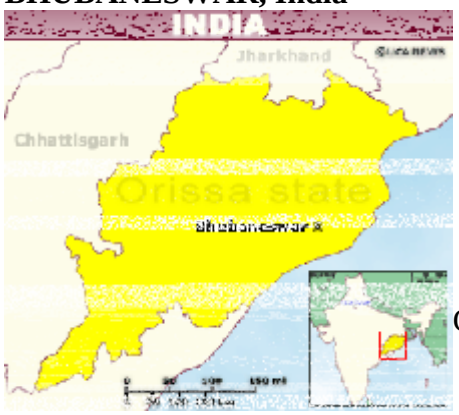
BHUBANESWAR, India



Christian leaders in Orissa have expressed relief after Christmas celebrations in the eastern Indian state took place peacefully.

Both the state and the federal governments had made elaborate arrangements in Orissa after Christian leaders sought security for their people, especially in Kandhamal district, most affected during seven weeks of anti-Christian violence this year.

The violence began on Aug. 24, a day after Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, a Hindu spiritual leader, and four associates were gunned down in the district. Hindu radical groups unleashed the violence, blaming Christian missioners for the murders even though Maoists claimed responsibility.

The groups had announced a statewide general strike on Christmas day to seek justice for the murders, but called it off after Orissa state's chief minister promised to book the culprits.

The sustained violence from August into October claimed more than 60 lives and rendered 50,000 people homeless.

An earlier round of anti-Christian violence in the state during Christmas 2007 left five people dead. Like this year, many Christians spent that Christmas season in forests and relief camps after Hindu radicals burned their homes, destroyed shops and vandalized churches.

Under these circumstances, this year's peaceful Christmas has brought "much relief," said Archbishop Raphael Cheenath of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar, who heads the Catholic Church in Orissa. "Christmas was observed peacefully in most parishes in Kandhamal," the Divine Word prelate told UCA News on Dec. 26.

The archbishop led midnight Mass at the pro-cathedral in Bhubaneswar, the state capital where he is based, 1,745 kilometers southeast of New Delhi. The original cathedral was established in Cuttack, the former capital.

The archbishop reported that some parishes in Kandhamal conducted Christmas programs on Dec. 24 evening, even though the administration allowed the holding of midnight services. Phulbani, the district headquarters, is

about 350 kilometers west of Bhubaneswar.

Midnight services were conducted in four relief camps in Kandhamal, the prelate added. He said Several priests from the archdiocese, guest priests from outside Orissa and some human rights activists spent their Christmas in the camps, and pastors from other denominations joined the services.

Father Joseph Philip, director of Caritas Regional Forum in Orissa, who conducted the service in the Tikabali refugee camp, confirmed the Christmas celebration was peaceful. The Kandhamal collector, the top government official in the district, opened a cultural program staged by the camp residents, he added.

In some places, the government provided camp residents with new clothes while the archdiocese supplied them with chicken curry and cakes, Father Philip reported.

B.D. Das of the Church of North India, a union of Protestant Churches, told UCA News he had contacted 121 Church workers in Orissa during Christmas. Everywhere, people reported that they had peaceful midnight services, said the lawyer, who is based in Cuttack, 20 kilometers north of Bhubaneswar.

Das pointed out that the government had provided "tight security" for services on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning at churches in the state, including about 30 in Kandhamal. He spoke of "prayers, singing and dancing in Kandhamal and elsewhere in Orissa."

A week ahead of Christmas, the administration deployed 7,700 members of the federal Central Reserve Police Force and Rapid Action Force, along with 200,000 state police personnel, to guard Christian villages and churches.

On Christmas Day, the federal government provided a helicopter to patrol Kandhamal and Sambalpur, another tribal-dominated district also affected by the anti-Christian violence.

Local media reported that some people set up roadblocks at three places in Kandhamal, but security forces cleared these roads immediately. Reports also said police arrested one person near Raikia, a major town in the district.

Meanwhile, Archbishop Cheenath has urged the federal and state governments to maintain the same level of security for Christians until the general election scheduled for May 2009.

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