News



by Catholic News Service

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A Catholic bishop was hospitalized after a group of parishioners attacked him, a security guard and a priest in a five-decade-old land dispute in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

Bishop Jerome Dhas Varuvel of Kuzhithurai left the hospital March 12, two days after he was attacked by a crowd of about 130 Catholic men and women, reported ucanews.com.

The guard remains in the hospital after suffering serious injuries in his attempt to protect the bishop, Fr. Russel Raj, diocesan chancellor, told ucanews.com.

Fr. Augustine Ponnaian, the diocesan financial administrator, suffered only minor injuries and was not hospitalized.

Police have registered a case against 58 Catholics, including 16 women, accusing them of committing serious crimes such as rioting with weapons, criminal intimidation and using weapons in a manner of causing death.

Police have arrested two people and are looking for the other 56, who are reportedly hiding to avoid arrest.

"It was a planned attack on the bishop," Ponnaian told ucanews.com March 13.

The parishioners were waiting outside the bishop's house for him to return from a function to discuss the land issue. They surrounded him when he reached the entrance door and demanded immediate resolution of the issue, he said.

The land dispute goes back to 1965 when Kuzhithurai Diocese, created four years ago, was part of Kottar Diocese. Catholics in two parishes disputed ownership of a piece of land in Appattuvilai village.

Varuvel issued a decree May 5, 2018, settling the dispute between St. Antony Church and St. Joseph Church. Some St. Antony parishioners claimed the settlement favored St. Joseph's and refused to accept it. They wanted the bishop to withdraw the decree.

Raj said the bishop's decision followed recommendations of a committee that included lawyers, prominent people and seven representatives of each parish.

The protest has been going on since the decree was issued, and the bishop asked them to produce documentary evidence to substantiate their claims.

"They have produced none so far, but they want to reverse the decision in their favor," Ponnaian said.

Varuvel also allowed them to challenge his decision in a civil court but they rejected his offer, he added.

Raj said the diocese does not want "everyone to be put behind the bars in this case." However, it wants police to act against "two key persons who orchestrated the crime and instigated people to attack the bishop in a brutal manner."

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