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Indian police arrested six suspected members of a hardline Hindu group for attacking 40 Catholics taking part in a 280-mile pilgrimage to a Marian shrine in Velankanni in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

The attackers were accused of blocking the pilgrims on a public road Aug. 18 and beating and verbally abusing them, a police inspector told ucanews.com Aug. 21.

A Marian statue the pilgrims were carrying in a decorated hand-pulled cart was destroyed in the attack, he said.

The suspects remained in custody as police investigated the case. They face charges of attempted murder, rioting, hurting religious sentiments and acting to destroy religious peace.

Officials of the Catholic bishops' forum in Tamil Nadu said the pilgrimage has occurred annually for more than a century.

Pilgrims trek to the renowned Portuguese-built shrine on the coast of the Bay of Bengal to take part in nine days of festivities that end Sept. 8, the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The pilgrims, who started their journey from neighboring Karnataka, continued the pilgrimage under police protection, church officials said.

"The attack is an open threat to the constitutional freedom of expression and freedom of movement to a citizen of the country," said Fr. Cyril Victor Joseph, director of the communication center in the Archdiocese of Bangalore.

"Such attacks are a serious threat to peace and harmony, especially between people of different religious groups. Though the attack was on a small group, the message is for all Christians. It was an open threat against public expression and practice of our faith," Joseph said.

Christian leaders have expressed concern that their people have faced increased attacks from radical Hindu groups since the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in 2014.

"For over a century, people, irrespective of their religion, have taken part in the Marian feast in Velankanni. It used to be a peaceful affair," Fr. L. Sahayaraj, deputy secretary of Tamil Nadu Bishops' Council, told ucanews.com. "Such acts of violence can only spread seeds of hatred among people."

Transporting statues and images of Mary in carts decorated as a chariot, groups of Catholics, including women and children, walk for days singing hymns and praying loudly, Benedict Jaikumar, a local Catholic, said.

Jaikumar, who is associated with the pilgrims who were attacked, said that no one was seriously injured in the incident.

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