News



Syro-Malabar Bishop Joy Alappatt, center, and Metropolitan Archbishop Borys A. Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia, in gold vestments, concelebrate Holy Qurbana July 20, 2024, in Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis during the National Eucharistic Congress. Holy Qurbana is the name for Mass in the Catholic Church's Syro-Malabar rite. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

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A Catholic bishop in Chicago from an Eastern church whose origins go back to St. Thomas the Apostle has joined some 300 faith leaders in sounding an alarm over religious persecution in India.

Bishop Joy Alappatt of the St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Catholic Eparchy of Chicago is among more than 300 signatories of an open letter to the U.S. State Department, asking Secretary Antony Blinken to designate India as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, due to significant violations of religious freedoms against Christians, Muslims, Dalits and Indigenous peoples.

Such designations are made under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, which requires the president to review the status of religious freedom in each of the world's nations, and to flag those whose governments engage in or tolerate particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Torture, prolonged detention without charges, forced disappearances or other flagrant denials of life, liberty and security all trigger the CPC designation. Nations that meet some but not all criteria are placed on a special watch list under the 2016 Wolf Act. The secretary of state is delegated by the president to make the applicable designations.

News of the open letter was announced Aug. 1 in a press release issued by the Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations. Based in Washington, the nonprofit FIACONA advocates on behalf of some 1 million Indian American Christians across the U.S. and Canada, while working to reduce violence against Christians in India.

The letter, according to FIACONA's news release, is the first "produced by U.S. Christian leaders addressing religious persecution in India," and was endorsed by "18 bishops, three archbishops and 167 clergy from diverse denominational and non-denominational backgrounds, eight current or former presidents and deans from five theological schools, and leaders from over 40 Christian organizations."

Along with Alappatt, Catholics endorsing the letter include Paulist Father James Michael DiLuzio, executive director of ecumenical and multifaith relations for that congregation, as well as several Indian and Indian American Catholic clergy and lay leaders based in the U.S. and India.

The letter warned of "rapidly escalating state-sanctioned violations of human rights directed at religious minorities." Under the current Bharatiya Janata Party government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi — prior to whom there were "significant but sporadic incidents of persecution" targeting Christians and religious minorities — the "situation has radically changed for the worse," said the signatories.

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The signatories noted that India is currently ranked at No. 11 on the World Watch List of Open Doors International, a global advocacy organization for persecuted Christians. The majority of the nation's 1.4 billion residents (close to 72%) are Hindu, with Muslims (about 15%), Christians (5%) and ethno-religionists (3.7%) representing the remaining quarter of the population.

In its 2024 list, Open Doors — whose 2023 report was cited by the State Department in its annual religious freedom assessment of India — found that "the rights of all categories of Christian communities are violated in India, since Hindutva radicals," who seek to create a Hindu nationalist state, "view them all as alien to the nation.

"They want to cleanse their country of Islam and Christianity and do not shy away from using extensive violence to achieve this," said Open Doors, noting that Hindu converts to Christianity bear "the brunt of persecution in India," and "are often physically assaulted and sometimes killed."

The FIACONA letter also cited the ecumenical Delhi-based United Christian Forum, which reported 720 attacks against Christians in 2023, a dramatic rise from 127 in 2014 when Modi first assumed office.

FIACONA says it documented 1,570 attacks in 2023, up from its previous report of 1,198 in 2022.

In addition, the letter pointed to India's ranking as the third worst "persecutor of the year" in 2023 by the Washington-based nonprofit International Christian Concern.

In a separate Aug. 1 press release, ICC announced that lawmakers in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, had passed a bill July 30 increasing punishments for violators of a 2021 anti-conversion law. ICC said the move will "make easy targets of Christian missionary groups."

Despite the data, however, "persecution of religious minorities is being buried by U.S. adoration of the current Indian regime," said the Rev. Neal Christie of the United Methodist Church, FIACONA's executive director, in the news release.

"This letter is a clarion call to the American church to stay alert to abuses caused by religious nationalism in what was a pluralistic and secular India," said the Rev. Peter Cook, executive director of the New York State Council of Churches and FIACONA board member, in the news release. "We hope it will inspire the U.S. government to stop ignoring how Modi's Hindu nationalist BJP systematically implements a religious nationalist agenda in both India and America."

OSV News has contacted the Indian Embassy in Washington for comment but did not receive an immediate response.