

Indian priest describes mob ordeal

Anto Akkara Catholic News Service | Aug. 29, 2008

BANGALORE, India ? Fr. Thomas Chellen, undergoing treatment at a Catholic hospital in Bhubaneswar, India, said he was grateful to be alive after a Hindu mob nearly set him on fire.

"They had poured kerosene on my head, and one held a matchbox in his hands to light the fire. But thanks to divine providence, in the end, they did not do that. Otherwise, I would not have been there to tell this horror," the 55-year-old priest, director of the pastoral center at Konjamendi in the Indian state of Orissa, told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview from his hospital bed Aug. 28.

Following the Aug. 23 murder of a Hindu leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, by Maoist extremists, Chellen said Hindu mobs started attacking Christian centers in Kandhamal, the district where the slain leader was based.

When a Hindu mob of 500 people broke into the pastoral center around noon Aug. 24, Chellen said he fled through the backyard with another priest and a nun.

"It was heartbreaking for us to watch from a distance the entire complex go up in smoke," said Chellen, who had supervised the construction of the center that opened in 2001 and could accommodate 200 people.

"They vandalized everything and set it on fire. It has been reduced to ashes," he added.

As the three watched from a distance, some other priests told them to flee.

"We fled to the jungles and came in the night to take shelter in the house of a Hindu friend and spent the night there," Chellen said, adding that the second priest left them to join other priests.

The following morning, he said, the Hindu family moved the priest and nun to an adjacent vacant house and locked it to give the impression that no one was inside.

However, the Hindu mobs overheard the priest speaking on his cell phone, broke into the room and dragged him and the nun outside.

"They began our crucifixion parade," said Chellen. The gang of about 50 armed Hindus "beat us up and led us like culprits along the road" to the burned pastoral center.

"There they tore my shirt and started pulling off the clothes of the nun. When I protested, they beat me hard with iron rods. Later, they took the sister inside (and) raped her while they went on kicking and teasing me, forcing (me) to say vulgar words," said the priest who has cuts, bruises and swollen tissue all over his body and stitches on his face.

"Later both of us, half-naked, were taken to the street, and they ordered me to have sex with the nun in public, saying nuns and priests do it. As I refused, they went on beating me and dragged us to the nearby government

office. Sadly, a dozen policemen were watching all this," he said.

Angry at his plea to the police for help, the mob beat the bleeding priest again.

Later, a government official and members of the mob took the priest and the nun to the police station, where Chellen said he was kicked in the face.

"The four-hour ordeal ended when a senior police officer arrived in the evening," said Chellen.

The priest said one of the most hurtful things about the incident was that some local Hindus whom he knew were watching the events and ignored his requests for help.

Later, the priest and nun were taken to a nearby police camp, he said.

"They were very kind to us, gave us clothes and slippers," said Chellen.

On Aug. 26, the priest and the nun were taken for medical tests. That afternoon they were sent by bus to Bhubaneswar.

Chellen said he was admitted to the hospital Aug. 27, while the traumatized nun was taken to a convent. He said the plans called for him to be moved to Mumbai for treatment.

Asked about the how the nun coped with the trauma, Chellen said: "We had no option and were simply following their commands. We resisted as much as we could. This is like being tortured for Christ."

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