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Violent mobs threaten Christian buildings in Kashmir

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Police in India-controlled Kashmir surrounded Catholic churches and schools to protect them after violent mobs went on a rampage Sept. 13, throwing Molotov cocktails at government and Christian buildings.

"There are policemen everywhere, wherever there are churches and schools, to protect Christian sites," Bishop Peter Celestine Elampassery of Jammu and Srinagar, India, told Fides, the news agency of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

Protesting against both Indian control of Kashmir and against a Florida minister's threat to burn the Quran, the predominantly Muslim separatists staged violent protests in several cities throughout the Kashmir valley Sept. 13. Police reported 18 deaths among the demonstrators and said more than 80 people, including police officers, were injured.

"We are very sad for what has happened. We are very concerned. The Christian community, which has always been at peace, feels threatened," Bishop Elampassery told Fides Sept. 14.

The bishop said no Catholic churches were damaged, although Molotov cocktails were thrown at the outside walls of Good Shepherd School in Pulwama.

"We feel helpless and powerless in the face of this wave of senseless violence," the bishop said. "We have nothing against the Muslims whom we respect as brothers. We have repeated this several times. However, a violent minority is fueling the tension," he said.

Of an estimated 10 million people living in Kashmir, an area claimed by both India and Pakistan, there are about 15,000 Catholics and about 10,000 members of other Christian communities.

Archbishop Felix Machado of Vasai, the former secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, told Fides that extremist groups in India, including those fighting against the government control of Kashmir, look for any excuse -- including the Florida minister's canceled plans to burn the Quran -- to increase tensions and create chaos.

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