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Fresh attacks by extremists on Indian Christians

by UCA News

NEW DELHI

Hindu extremists continue to attack Christians and burn their houses in Orissa as Church and other Christian leaders meet top political leaders in the capital.

Mobs attacked three villages Oct. 7-8, burning down at least 30 Christian homes in Kandhamal district, the worst-hit region in the eastern Indian state. They looted and then razed 25 houses in Balligada and five houses in Jajespanga. They also attacked a Christian leader's house in Sujeli, according to Church sources in Bhubaneswar, the state capital.

The fresh attacks came as Christian leaders Abraham Mathai and H.T. Sangliana met Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Oct. 7 in New Delhi seeking action against the Orissa government.

The "only option left for us now is to press for the dismissal of the Orissa government," Mathai told UCA News on Oct. 9. A member of the minority commission of Maharashtra state in western India, he said the Orissa state government has failed to protect the lives and property of its citizens and their constitutional right to freely practice their religion.

The Indian Constitution provides for the dismissal of a state government if it fails to uphold constitutional rights. But Singh, who heads the federal coalition government, is under pressure from some allies not to dismiss the Orissa government, Mathai said.

A day after the meeting with Singh, another delegation of Christians and Hindus sat with federal opposition leader L.K. Advani in a Hindu-Christian meeting to seek ways to end the violence.

At the end of their Oct. 8 meeting, the two groups issued a joint statement stressing the need to promote interreligious peace. They also recommended dialogue between the communities on all aspects of life

including the issue of religious conversions.

The Christian leaders who signed the statement included Archbishops Vincent Concessao of Delhi and Raphael Cheenath of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar. Divine Word Archbishop Cheenath is based in Bhubaneswar, 1,745 kilometers southeast of New Delhi.

Swami Chidanand Saraswati, the Hindu spiritual leader who initiated the meeting, promised to build at least one destroyed village in Kandhamal in cooperation with the state and the Church. He is based in the Hindu holy town of Rishikesh, some 220 kilometers northeast of New Delhi.

Nonetheless, Christians in Orissa continue to live in fear. Sources in the archbishop's residence in Bhubaneswar told UCA News that about 12,000 people have left relief camps, where they stayed after mobs burned their homes.

The violence began a day after a Hindu leader who opposed conversions to Christianity and four of his associates were killed on Aug. 23. Even though a Maoist group claimed responsibility for the killings, Hindu radical groups blamed the murder on Christians.

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Violent mobs have so far killed at least 52 people. They have also burned down 4,500 houses, 100 churches and 20 convents, as well as presbyteries and other Church institutions. About 50,000 people have been rendered homeless, with thousands still living in relief camps and maybe more hiding in forests.

The government claims that as peace returns people from the relief camps have begun returning to their villages, but the archdiocesan sources denied this. "That is not true. They are fleeing camps because they do not feel secure there. They are not going to their villages. They are going away from Kandhamal," one said.

National newspapers also reported that Christians are not going back to Kandhamal. Rajesh Ramachandran, a journalist who toured the district, told UCA News he could not find any Christians in the attacked villages.

An agitated Mathai wants Christians to force political action against the Orissa government for failing to end the violence. The "compulsions of coalition politics" are the biggest hurdle for the federal administration to act against the Orissa government, Mathai said, adding that he plans to meet some coalition party leaders to press for the Orissa government's dismissal.

Mathai also said he does not agree with bishops who want to dialogue with right-wing Hindu leaders on the conversion issue. "There is nothing to dialogue on that. We do not advocate conversion using any force or inducement. It is the right of every citizen to follow a religion of choice," he asserted.

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