

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 21, 2011 at 10:58am

Bishops lead sit-in over Indian court findings

by Catholic News Service

BANGALORE, India -- Nineteen Catholic and Protestant bishops staged a sit-in to protest the findings of a report that cleared Hindu fundamentalists of a series of attacks on Christian targets in southern Karnataka state in September 2008.

The clerics, including 13 Catholic bishops, were joined by nearly 500 church leaders in the southern city of Bangalore, where they again criticized the findings of a commission chaired by Judge B. K. Somashekhara for not identifying the attackers in 57 incidents involving Christian churches and other sites.

The demonstrators gathered in central Bangalore, with the bishops sitting on chairs in their clerical garb under a midday sun.

Organized by the Karnataka United Christian Forum for Human Rights and the Karnataka Region Catholic Bishops' Council, the church leaders said the report was biased and that it "whitewashed" the incidents.

The crowd renewed a call for a new inquiry headed by the India's Central Bureau of Investigation. They also demanded the withdrawal of more than 150 cases lodged against Christians who were injured in the attacks.

The demonstration was the latest in a series of planned protests. A massive demonstration was planned for Bangalore Feb. 21.

In its report released Jan. 28, the commission absolved police, Hindu fundamentalist groups and the state government -- which is led by members of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party -- of the attacks despite testimony by dozens of Christians describing the nature of the violence.

Archbishop Bernard Moras of Bangalore repeated earlier claims that the report was politically motivated. It is "completely one-sided, biased, propagandist," he told demonstrators, adding that it was "totally unfair to all Christians."

"The Christians who were the target of attacks and the victims of the organized mayhem and vandalism have been converted into the perpetrators, while the real attackers and all forces and elements that had directly or indirectly supported have been given a clean chit," Archbishop Moras said.

Afterward, Archbishop Moras told Catholic News Service that the protest was organized to express the "anguish" Christians felt.

He also criticized the report's "shocking recommendations" that called for establishing a registrar to manage church properties and monitor the working of the churches, pastors and their sources of income.

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"This seems to be a step to introduce an anti-conversion law," he said.

Meanwhile, the Global Council of Indian Christians organized a separate demonstration in another part of Bangalore which drew an estimated 3,000 people.

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