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Catholic clergy demonstrate for dalit rights in India

by Catholic News Service

NEW DELHI -- A rally by Christians and Muslims demanding equal rights for their dalit members blocked traffic in the main streets of the capital for several hours July 28.

More than 10,000 people, including a Catholic cardinal, bishops, priests and religious women from across India braved intense heat to march more than three miles from a park to the Indian parliament.

The march capped a four-day protest that began July 25 with a fast organized by the National Coordination Committee for Dalit Christians, a joint program of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India and the National Council of Churches in India.

Dalit means "broken open" in Sanskrit and denotes people formerly known as untouchables in India's multitiered caste system.

In 1950, the government made Hindu dalits eligible for free education and quotas in government jobs to improve their social status. The statutory benefits were extended to Sikh dalits in 1956 and to Buddhist dalits in 1990.

However, the benefits continue to be denied to Christian dalits, who account for two-thirds of the 27 million Christians in India. Repeated protests have not swayed the Indian government. The same benefits are denied to Muslim dalits.

Cardinal Oswald Gracias was among the clergy who joined the rally. He has urged the government to grant full rights -- called scheduled caste status -- to dalit Christians and Muslims.

The prelate said excluding dalits from receiving the same benefits as people of other religions is "blatant discrimination" and in violation of the Indian constitution, which guarantees equality.

Cardinal Gracias also asked the government to follow the recommendations of the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, which said in a 2007 report that denying the quota right to Christian and Muslim dalits violated justice. The Indian parliament tabled the report in 2009.

The National United Christian Forum, comprising the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, the National Council of Churches in India and the Evangelical Fellowship of India issued a statement July 27 supporting the rally and hunger strike.

The forum called the demands of Christian and Muslim dalits "genuine."

"The NUCF strongly believes that it is only just and fair that the Christians and Muslims of scheduled caste origin should get the legal protection and other educational and employment benefits given to their counterparts in other religions," the statement said. "The NUCF is convinced that change of one's religious faith does not alter one's social status in India and the dalit Christians and dalit Muslims in India have been victims of social and economic exploitation for centuries."

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