

Orissa One Year Later: Fear, Persecution Remain High

4,000 Survivors Of August 2008 Violence In India Remain In Refugee Camps

SANTA ANA, CA (Aug. 20, 2009) – Manini Digal knows the wrath of Hindu extremists in India.

Manini, 17, from a poor family, was caught by extremists last August during the outbreak of anti-Christian violence in Orissa.

They tore off her clothes and attempted to rape her. Then they poured kerosene over her and set her on fire. Her body was severely burned. Manini arrived at a hospital in critical condition.

Open Doors co-workers covered her medical expenses during her recovery and also prayed with her. She is now praising God for His protection and recovery.

Sunday, August 23 marks the one-year anniversary of the violence in Orissa, which was started when Hindu leader Swami Laxmanananda was assassinated. Hindu nationalists wrongfully blamed it on Christians and used his murder as an excuse to attack them. On Sunday India's church leaders will commemorate the anniversary with "Peace Day" which will include marches, fasting and prayer vigils.

Since the outbreak of violence last year, at least 120 people have been murdered, 250 churches destroyed and over 50,000 individuals displaced. It has been claimed that this was the worst case of religious persecution in India since the partition of Pakistan and India in 1947.

More than 4,000 Christians in Orissa are currently seeking refuge in relief camps and are unable to return to their villages for fear of death or forcible conversion to Hinduism. Recent reports state that Christians remain targets of violence and persecution by Hindu extremists.

According to Compass Direct News, a reign of terror continues in the area as the former Hindu rioters are issuing death threats to witnesses during trials. Of the more than 750 cases filed in various police stations in Kandhamal district and neighboring Gajapati district, only six people have been convicted in two cases. Some of the witnesses are running away to save their lives after receiving death threats. This year India jumped from No. 30 to No. 22 on Open Doors' World Watch List of countries where Christians suffer the most severe persecution. Last week the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) placed India on its watch list for frequent outbreaks of violence against minorities, especially Christians. The report sharply criticized the Indian government for failure to protect the rights of religious minorities.

Eight states in India have passed anti-conversion laws although only five states are currently implementing the law. Anti-conversion laws are designed to prevent Hindus from converting to

Christianity despite the fact that India is the largest democracy (1.1 billion people) in the world and its constitution guarantees freedom of religion.

The violence in Orissa and in other states comes at a time when many Christians feel that Hindu fundamentalism is on the rise. The extremists' goal is to make India a Hindu nation rather than a secular one. There are an estimated 25 million Christians in India (2.3 percent) with 80.6 percent Hindu and 13.4 percent Muslim.

"The situation is still bleak for Christians in Orissa," says Open Doors USA President/CEO Carl Moeller.

"Many of our brothers and sisters remain homeless. The area simmers with tension and fear that major violence could resume at any time. Christians are still being persecuted. They need your prayers."

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