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Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance, follow-up and implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

Written statement* submitted by European Centre for Law and Justice, The / Centre Européen pour le droit, les Justice et les droits de l'homme, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[04 June 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

REQUESTING THAT THE U.N. HOLD INDIA ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE ONGOING AND INCREASING TARGETING AND PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN INDIA

1. INTRODUCTION

In its 2020 report, a human rights group listed India as the 10th worst place in the world for Christians to live.¹ This ranking is primarily because of Hindu nationalism, “which advocates for the belief that India belongs to Hindus and people of other faiths should find somewhere else to live, work, and worship.”² In addition, “[s]everal states in India have adopted anti-conversion laws, and the ruling Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has made it clear that it wants to impose these laws nationwide.”³ As a result, “converts to Christianity from Hindu backgrounds or tribal religions are often extremely persecuted by their family members and communities.”⁴

Christians also face discrimination from government authorities, as is illustrated by the case of Christian Pastor and U.S. Citizen, Bryan Nerren, who was recently freed from over 7 months of wrongful detention in India and allowed to return home to his wife and family in the United States.

It is clear that hostility toward Christianity and other minority religions on the part of both civil and governmental actors is a growing threat. It is also clear the Indian government has been incapable or unwilling to act in order to prevent these atrocities from escalating further. As India is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), it is time that India be respectfully reminded of its international obligations to protect the freedom of *all* its citizens to worship as they choose.

2. BACKGROUND

India is home to over 1.35 billion people, and is a majority Hindu nation, with over 80% of the population practicing Hinduism. Practitioners of Islam are the second largest religious group at over 13%. In contrast, Christianity is practiced by only 2.3%. although India’s constitution assures religious freedom and India is also a signatory to the ICCPR, which guarantees human rights, including the freedom of religion and belief, India is experiencing an escalation of religiously motivated hostility and violence that targets Christians. In fact, in a recent report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) stated: “In 2019, religious freedom conditions in India experienced a drastic turn downward, with religious minorities under increasing assault.”⁵ The USCIRF report also recommended that India be categorized as a country of particular concern (CPC).⁶

In 2014, the Hindu-nationalist BJP party came to power. Within the party “has come a growing faction of hardliners who want to turn India into a strictly Hindu nation, viewing Christians and

1 *India*, OPEN DOORS, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/india/> (last visited 2 June 2020).

2 *Id.*

3 *Id.*

4 *Id.*

5 *India: USCIRF-Recommended for Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)*, USCIRF, <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/India.pdf> (last visited 3 June 2020).

6 *Id.*

other religious minorities as foreigners in their own land.”⁷ Reports and incidents indicate that this sentiment is not found simply at the civil level, but is also held by government officials, causing them to turn a blind eye to religiously motivated violence against Christians, and even to target Christians for arrest.

3. THE CASE OF PASTOR BRYAN NERREN

“Are you a Christian? Are you going to see Christians?” These questions were repeatedly asked of American Pastor Bryan Nerren by an Indian customs official.

Pastor Nerren is a Christian Pastor in Tennessee. He is a loving husband, father, and grandfather, who also has a compassionate heart for others. He heads up the non-profit ministry Asian Children’s Education Fellowship, which has been training Sunday School teachers in India and Nepal for 17 years. In a recent trip to attend conferences in India and Nepal on October 5, 2019, Pastor Nerren was targeted and arrested as he stepped off the plane in Bagdogra, India.

What exactly was Pastor Nerren’s alleged “crime”? Evading a duty on funds he was carrying for the conference and trip. However, he was not even carrying the minimum amount of money that would have made it a crime even if he were trying to evade the duty. The reality is Pastor Nerren was never informed of the duty, although he openly declared the funds to customs in New Delhi. He was, however, specifically asked if he was a Christian and if the funds would be used to support Christian causes. And although New Delhi customs returned the funds to Pastor Nerren and told him that he was cleared and free to go, that was definitely not the case. The truth was that he was to be falsely arrested and endure a more than seven-month nightmare, while being trapped in India.

For the seven months Pastor Nerren was trapped in India, he was caught in a battle between the court and customs. Despite having broken no law, and continued compliance with court orders and customs’ demands– including turning over the total amount of funds he had carried into India, plus paying a penalty, customs refused to comply with court orders and provide documents that would allow the court to release Pastor Nerren’s passport and lift the travel ban.

During this time, one customs official made it quite clear that Pastor Nerren was targeted because of his Christian faith: “We have been ordered by the central government to crush Christianity. To stop you Americans from bringing money here, and to eliminate Christianity. And we’re going to do that.” And that they did. Wrongfully detaining Pastor Nerren for seven months and fleecing him of all of his funds as well as a penalty and compounding fee.

Thankfully, in May 2020, after concerted diplomatic efforts, the court finally released Pastor Nerren’s passport and lifted the travel ban, and he was allowed to return home to his wife and family in the United States. However, this case has highlighted the growing issues in India of the increased targeting of Christians with the goal of eradicating Christianity from India.

⁷ Peerzada Ummer, *India Church Attack Underscores Tide of Anti-Christian Persecution*, LICAS NEWS (13 Mar. 2020), <https://www.licas.news/2020/03/13/india-church-attack-underscores-tide-of-anti-christian-persecution/>.

4. RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED VIOLENCE AGAINST CHRISTIANS

In its 2020 report, USCIRF stated that “[t]he national government allowed violence against minorities and their houses of worship to continue with impunity, and also engaged in and tolerated hate speech and incitement to violence.”⁸

For example, in March 2020, about 30 Christians distributing aid to the poor “were confronted by members of the Hindu Munnani extremist group.”⁹ A crowd gathered, and the Christians were threatened and verbally abused “in extremely foul language.”¹⁰ While they were being threatened, the Christians were also surrounded and unable to leave. “The Christians attempted to call the police for help, but were informed by the Hindu Munnani that a case had already been filed against the Christians.”¹¹ According to reports, “when the police arrived [they took the Christians] into custody.”¹² One Christian stated: “[The Police] spoke ill about Christianity and slapped us as we stood there in the police station helplessly,”¹³ and according to reports, the “Inspector of Police Senthil Vinayagam spoke abusively to the Christians in an attempt to incite [them]. However, when this did not work, the police released the Christians with a warning not to return to Anumandai village.”¹⁴

Also in March 2020, news reports detailed the efforts of a “Hindu nationalist group” to shut down Christianity in India. The leader of this group claimed in a media interview that “They (Christian missionaries) are destroying the ancient culture and indigenous religion of the tribals (aborigines).”¹⁵ The group, World Hindu Council, launched a nationwide campaign against what it calls “forcible” conversions to Christianity.¹⁶

5. REQUEST

Clearly, these hostile acts targeting Christians are violating the peaceful lives of Christians in India. In order to address the harassment and attempt to root out Christianity from Indian culture, India must act now. This is only the beginning, if meaningful action is not taken now, the problem in India will worsen.

It is imperative that the U.N. take swift action and work with the government of India to ensure that the targeting of Christians in India cease, and that they be allowed to peacefully live out their religious beliefs without fear of civil or government action against them. No one should have to live under the fear of being abused, imprisoned, or even killed simply because of their faith.

⁸ *India: USCIRF-Recommended for Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)*, USCIRF, <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/India.pdf> (last visited 3 June 2020).

⁹ *Christians in Southern India Beaten & Detained for Giving Aid to the Poor*, PERSECUTION.ORG (31 Mar. 2020), <https://www.persecution.org/2020/03/31/christians-southern-india-beaten-detained-giving-aid-poor/>.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Anugrah Kumar, *India: Hindu Leader Threatens Christians with New Wave of Persecution*, CHRISTIAN POST (23 Mar. 2020), <https://www.christianpost.com/news/india-hindu-leader-threatens-christians-with-new-wave-of-persecution.html>.

¹⁶ Pankaj Shah, *VHP Launches Campaign Against Forced Religious Conversions in Lucknow*, TIMES OF INDIA (18 Mar. 2020), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/vhp-launches-campaign-against-forced-religious-conversions/articleshow/74682023.cms>.

This is why we respectfully request that this Council work with government of India in order to enact change and protect the religious freedom of all people within India.
