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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.

[01 February 2021]

* 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

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 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 and other religious minorities. This hostility can be seen at both the civil and governmental levels, and is a growing threat. Despite its obligations under domestic and international law, to date, India has made no indication that it is willing to act in order to protect all of its citizens and put a stop to the atrocities that Christians are facing and has instead rejected any criticism.[1]

2. BACKGROUND

In its 2021 report, a human rights group has listed India as the 10th worst place in the world for Christians to live.[2] This ranking is primarily a consequence of growing Hindu nationalism which has resulted in a significant increase in the persecution of Christians in India over the past five years.[3] Within the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) "has come a growing faction of hardliners who want to turn into a strictly Hindu nation, viewing Christians and other religious minorities as foreigners in their own land".[4] In addition, according to the report, "Christians are often deliberately overlooked when official COVID-19 food and aid are distributed," which "has left many desperate for food".[5] The human rights group indicates that according to its on the ground sources, "more than 80 per cent of all the [Christian] they visited were denied government food aid".[6] In addition, one report, issued by the Delhi-based Evangelical Fellowship of India, documented 327 cases of persecution against Christians in 2020.[7] The greatest type of persecution documented came in the form of threats/harassment, physical violence and/or arrest, false accusations and/or arrest, and social boycott.[8]

Clearly, through the denial of official COVID-19 aid and the blind eye that officials often turn to religiously motivated violence against Christians, the government in India is complicit in and even the perpetrator of religiously motivated discrimination. Furthermore, eight states in India now enforce anti-conversion laws, while three other states have passed anti-conversion laws that are not currently in force.[9] Even more concerning, the BJP has indicated that it plans to introduce a bill to prevent religious conversions,[10] making any religious conversion illegal. According to reports, preparations for this bill are already underway. Consequently, "the expanding footprint of the anti-conversion laws bring a step closer the BJP's manifesto promising a nation-wide law to check evangelization by 'missionaries'".[11] All of these laws are in direct conflict with Article 25 of India's constitution which protects the rights of Indian citizens to "freely profess, practise, and propagate [their] religion".[12]

3. RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED VIOLENCE AGAINST CHRISTIANS

Christians in India are experiencing continued and increasingly concerning religiously motivated discrimination and violence both at the hands of civil and state actors.

For example, in January 2021, one Christian advocacy group reports that "police officials in India's Karnataka state banned a community of Christians from gathering for worship services indefinitely. The officials justified this unconstitutional action by claiming that

none of the approximately 50 Christians were Christians by birth and must have been coercively or fraudulently converted to Christianity". This decision is indicative of the persecution Christians in India are facing at the hands of the government because of the BJP's Hindu nationalist agenda.

Also in January 2021, a mob of 20-25 men, including one man wielding an axe, attacked "[s]ix Christian families [who] were worshipping in a wood-and-hay structure in eastern India".[13] According to the report, the mob "manhandled the Christians, damaged [an adjacent] Christian home, and broke the thatched structure with the axe".[14] Furthermore, "[t]hey threatened to chase them out of their homes and the village if they reported the matter to the police".[15]

In December 2020, a Church community in Karnataka state "was attacked by a mob of radical Hindu nationalists as they were clearing a plot of land for the construction of a Church. The Christians were brutally beaten by the extremists as a result".[16] However, when the Christians went to lodge their complaints with the police, "the police told [them] that Christians cannot hold any meetings in the village and that pastors from outside the village cannot visit the Christians families . . .".[17]

On 25 November 2020, around 27 people were injured when "[a] mob of 50 people attacked a group of at least 100 Christians in . . . the tribal community Singawaram village, Sukma District".[18] According to reports, "the believers had been organizing festivities for Advent the night before" and "[w]hile the exact circumstances leading up to the attacked were not verified, . . . sources report that the mob, armed with homemade weapons attacked the Christians as they slept".[19] While the attack is report to have occurred "between midnight and 2am[, p]olice did not arrive at the scene until about 7 am".[20] Also concerning is the report that one of the Christians was forced by the police to "write an apology on Facebook saying that [the Christians'] description of the incident was false", and "[h]e was also told not to report 'such incidents in the future'".[21]

In October 2020, gunmen attacked "a Pentecostal church in the Punjab state" open firing on worshipers at a prayer meeting. The attack resulted in the death of one Christian and injuries to three others.[22] This was not the first time this particular church had come under attack.

These are just a few examples of the violence and hostility Christians are facing in India today.

4. REQUEST

Clearly, these hostile acts targeting Indian Christians are violating their right to freely practice their faith. In order to address the harassment and the obvious 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 by calling on the government of India to ensure that the targeting of Christians in India is stopped. Government action must be taken to ensure that all of India's citizens are 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, targeted, or even killed simply because of their faith.

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

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