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India: religious violence reaches unacceptable levels

The gruesome killing of a Christian missionary and two of his sons in the eastern Indian state of Orissa on Saturday morning is the gravest in a long list of acts of violence against religious minorities in India in recent months, Amnesty International said today.

Mr Graham Stewart Staines, 58, and his sons Philip, aged 10 and Timothy aged 7, were asleep in their station wagon in the village of Manoharpur in Keonjhar district when it was reportedly attacked by a mob of between 50-100 people armed with bows and arrows and set on fire.

"State and central authorities in India must take all necessary steps to prevent further acts of violence against religious minorities," Amnesty International urged.

The organization joined in the universal condemnation of the killing of Mr Staines and his two sons and welcomes the steps taken by the authorities in Orissa to investigate the incident, arrest those responsible and bring them to justice.

Violence against religious minorities, mainly Christians, is escalating throughout India. In the western state of Gujarat, violence against Christian property continues, with two prayer-halls reportedly attacked in Surat district on 22 January.

These new episodes of violence took place on the day the Chief Minister rejected an interim report by the National Commission for Minorities on the situation in Gujarat as "biased and one-sided". The report found that attacks on Christians and their property had been carried out with the connivance of Hindu groups and was critical of the Gujarat government's role in failing to protect minorities.

In recent weeks Amnesty International has written to both the Gujarat and Union governments, urging them to take action to prevent further violence against persons and property.

"The Indian Government has an obligation to guarantee all its citizens the right to physical security and protection against violence, whether inflicted by state officials or by other individuals or groups," the organization said.

"These rights, as well as the right to freedom of religion, are guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reflected in the Indian Constitution."

Amnesty International is extremely concerned that right-wing Hindu political groups and associations, including the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) [Association of National Volunteers], *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP) [World Hindu Council] and *Bajrang Dal* [trained militant wing of the VHP] have failed to clearly denounce acts of violence and have made public statements

which might have incited individuals to violence.

Background

India has witnessed a series of attacks against religious minorities in recent months -- most notably against Christians in the western state of Gujarat, where several church buildings have been burnt and individuals attacked.

There have been numerous other incidents throughout India including in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. Concerns have been expressed that these attacks have been carried out directly by, or in connivance with, right-wing Hindu groups with links to the ruling *Bharatiya Janata* Party, including the VHP and *Bajrang Dal*. These groups have spoken out strongly against the alleged forcible conversion of tribal people and others by Christian missionaries, justified attacks on Christians and their property and advocated their expulsion from India.

The murder of Graham Stewart Staines and his two sons was carried out in Manoharpur village in the Keonjhar district of Orissa in the early morning of 24 January. Villagers were reportedly attacked when they tried to help. Police have stated that the mob was chanting slogans of the *Bajrang Dal* and were led by a man well known in the area for his fanatical Hindu beliefs and opposition to minorities. A case has been registered with police and around 50 people have been arrested. An inquiry has also been ordered to be carried out by the Revenue Divisional Commissioner. Police records in the area also indicate a recent increase in attacks against religious minorities, including Muslims, carried out by right-wing Hindu nationalist groups.

Much of the violence against Christians has centred around deprived areas of India where Christian missionaries have traditionally carried out development activities with tribal and *dalit* communities, organizing health and educational services. Some observers have commented that members of Christian communities are being targeted for their work in support of the empowerment of the socially and economically disadvantaged, which has threatened local powerful interests.

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