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India: Government should match its words with action and halt violence against Christian minorities in Orissa

India should match its words with its actions and ensure that members of the Christian minority community in the eastern state of Orissa are protected against renewed communal violence, Amnesty International said today.

Despite the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's statement in Paris yesterday, 30 September, that the violence was a "national shame" and that his Government had taken a "firm stand" to halt it, violence against the Christian minorities has continued.

The last two days have witnessed renewed attacks by supporters of Hindu nationalist organizations, including Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal, against the Christian minorities and their places of worship in Kandhamal district in Orissa, leaving three people dead, more than 15 people injured, including some policemen, and hundreds homeless.

The month-long violence against the Christian minorities, which began on 24 August after the murder of a prominent Hindu nationalist leader, now appears to have resumed after a brief lull. Amnesty International has spoken to people who have confirmed that an atmosphere of insecurity prevails in the district in the wake of the most recent attacks despite the presence of central paramilitary reserve police deployed by the Central government at the request of the state government forces.

The number of Christians who have taken shelter in 25 relief camps run by the state authorities has gone up from 12,000 to 20,000 during the last month and is still increasing. Amnesty International fears that most of them are unable to return home. According to camp residents, they face threats of violence and, in some cases, an ultimatum from supporters of these Hindu nationalist organizations to convert to Hinduism if they want to return home.

Amnesty International urges the Government of India and the Government of Orissa to:

- * immediately halt the violence against the Christian minorities in Kandhamal district
- * provide adequate security for the relief camps set up for those displaced due to the violence and ensure peaceful return to their homes
- * conduct prompt and impartial investigation into the attacks by competent authority, publish the results and bring those responsible to justice
- * ensure protection of the religious rights of the minorities.

Background

More than 28 people have died during the communal violence in Orissa since 24 August, eight of these shot by police. Hundreds have been injured in the violence targeting the Christian minorities in Kandhamal district in Orissa. The district had been tense for some time before 24 August. In December 2007, at least 11 people died in communal violence in the district, four of them shot by police. A number of Christian institutions were attacked by supporters of Hindu nationalist

organizations. A judicial inquiry into this 2007 violence, announced by the state government, is still in progress. During the last month, a number of places of worship belonging to the Christian minorities in the southern state of Karnataka have been targeted by supporters of Hindu nationalist organizations including the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal.

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