

PUBLIC

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Fear for safety

INDIA

Population of Kandhamal district, Orissa state

The murder of a prominent Hindu nationalist leader has been used by his supporters to justify violent attacks on the Christian minority in the Kandhamal district of the eastern state of Orissa. At least 10 people have been killed so far, and the violence is continuing, putting many others in danger.

A local leader of the Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a Hindu nationalist organisation, Lakshmananda Saraswathi and four VHP members, were shot dead by a mob who went to their homes on the night of 23 August. Attacks on Christian people and places of worship, as well as Christian-run orphanages and businesses, began the following morning. In Kandhamal district the Christian minority make up 15-20% of the population, a larger proportion than the surrounding districts. Most of its inhabitants are indigenous people (*adivasis*).

At least six people were killed in the attacks on 24-26 August and four people were killed on 26 August when police opened fire in an attempt to disperse violent crowds who were apparently aiming to continue the attacks.

According to human rights activists in Orissa, the police delayed taking action, and did not do enough to protect the district population, as huge crowds gathered on 25 August for the cremation of Lakshmananda Saraswathi, where inflammatory speeches were delivered even as the violence was going on. On the night of 26 August, with the violence continuing, the authorities put the entire district under curfew for all but a varying period of about two hours daily, and deployed federal riot police.

The situation in Kandhamal is still tense, with hundreds of people defying curfew orders to continue the attacks. Several areas from where violence has been reported are still inaccessible to police.

The state government announced on 25 August that a special team had been constituted to investigate the murder of Lakshmananda Saraswathi and his associates. According to human rights activists, this appeared to have little effect on the violence. Violence against institutions run by the Christian minority is also being reported from other districts of Orissa including Gajapati, Rayagada, Sundergarh and Kendrapara. The National Commission for Minorities will send a team to assess the situation in Orissa.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The situation in Kandhamal district had been tense for some time before the latest violence began. In December 2007, at least 11 people died in communal violence, four of them shot by police. A number of Christian institutions were attacked. A judicial inquiry into the violence, announced by the state government, is still in progress.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- urging the authorities to take immediate action to halt attacks on the Christian minority in Kandhamal and other districts of Orissa.
- urging them to conduct a prompt and impartial investigation into the attacks, publish the results and bring those responsible to justice.

APPEALS TO: (Fax numbers may be difficult to reach. Please keep trying.)

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Chief Minister of Orissa
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Naveen Nivas
Aerodrome Road
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Orissa, India
Fax: +91 674 2535100
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Salutation: Dear Chief Minister

Shivraj V. Patil
Minister of Home Affairs
Ministry of Home Affairs
Room no. 104
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Salutation: Dear Home Minister

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 8 October 2008.