

**Embassy of India
Warsaw**

Attacks on Christians in Kandhamal District of Orissa

The Indian media had carried extensive coverage on violence against Christians in Kandhamal District of Orissa in September/October 2008. As would be evident from the backgrounder provided below, the deep ethnic divide and remoteness of villages in the district resulted in the violence recurring or spreading to new areas within the district. It has to be appreciated that India is a sub-continent of over 1.1 billion people of language, ethnic and religious diversity and localised communal clashes have occurred from time to time in different parts of the country. At no time has there been persecution of any community and by no stretch of imagination can the Kandhamal clashes be described as "persecution of Christians in India", as is sought to be publicized by certain quarters in Poland. Also, no international or Indian media has of late reported of any recurrence in violence in the area for more than a month.

BACKGROUND

The district of Kandhamal is located in the central Orissa, bound by Boudh district in North, Rayagada in South, Ganjam and Nayagarh districts in East and Kalahandi district in West. Kandhamal is the most backward district of Orissa with a geographical area of 8021 sq. kms. The district has hilly and difficult terrain and remote and isolated habitations are not easily accessible. As per the 2001 census, the District had a population of 648,000, comprising 51.96% Scheduled Tribes(ST), 16.89% Scheduled Castes(SC), 18.20% Christians and 0.35% Muslims. The population is divided on ethnic lines between Kandha (ST) and Pana (SC) communities. There are long-standing disputes between them on land rights and perceived discriminations in ST/SC reservation benefits. The district has been witnessing frequent communal violence, which has increased markedly since December, 2007.

As is evident from the above, the Kandhamal District is inhabited by majority Kandha Schedule Tribe people. Both ST and SC enjoy certain reservation benefits. But a person belonging to SC category can exercise the reservation benefits only if he or she professes Hinduism, Buddhism or Sikhism. As per the Constitutional provisions, the reservation benefits are lost if the SC person gets converted to Islam/Christianity. The Schedule Caste people who had converted to Christianity were registering themselves as ST to at least take advantage of the ST reservation benefits, which is open to all religious groups. This was opposed by

the Hindu STs to safeguard their own interests and has been the main reason for violence. A large number of Panas have converted to Christianity over the past decades and the Kandhas have opposed this. The voice of protest against conversion has become increasingly discernible. As early as 1969, Swami Laxmananda Saraswati had established an Ashram at Chakapad to educate the Hindu tribes and opened educational institutions for tribal boys and girls. There have also been reports of activities by ultra left elements in the area in recent times, which has been a new dimension added to further complicate the law and order situation in the district.

Communal violence in Kandhamal had started from Christmas time in December 2007. The 'Phulbani Kui Jana Kalyana Sangha', an NGO founded by the Pana Schedule Caste community, has been demanding Scheduled Tribe rights for the Christian SCs and they had taken the matter to High Court, which in 2002 directed the State Government to make necessary amendments to allow the reservation benefits to the Pana SC Christians as well.

But the State Government clarified that Pana tribe cannot be declared ST. This matter took a communal turn when the ST people speaking the 'Kui' tribal language called for a 36-hour bandha on Christmas Day in 2007. Communal tensions were further fanned by objection from Hindus to the erection of Christian arches in a busy market area in the district which led to clashes between the two communities. Swami Laxmananda Saraswati was assaulted by Christian youth while he was visiting the market area. The resulting violence caused 3 deaths, 25 injured and about 700 houses, 26 churches and 5 prayer halls burnt/damaged.

RECENT INCIDENTS OF VIOLENCE

In the backdrop of mutual distrust and animosity, the tenuous bonds of peaceful coexistence between the two communities got destroyed by the brutal murder of Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, who was in the forefront of the campaign against the alleged forcible conversion of Hindus to Christianity. On 23.8.2008, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati and four others were killed in Jaleshpata Ashram under Tumudibandha Police Station of Kandhamal District by some armed persons.

As per reports received from the State Government, 39 persons were killed during the violence and 134 persons received serious injuries. 1474 houses and 97 religious buildings, including Churches are reported to have been damaged/burnt.

Also, in the wake of the above incidents, more than twenty four thousand persons are reported to have left their homes and taken shelter in relief camps set up by the State Government. The State Government has reported that around fifteen thousand such persons have so far returned to their homes.

ACTION TAKEN BY MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS. GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

The Ministry of Home Affairs had remained in continuous and close touch with the Government of Orissa ever since incidents of communal violence were reported in the State. The State Government was asked/ directed to take stringent action against the persons indulging in communal violence, including identifying and apprehending elements inciting and stoking communal violence and hatred; ensure arrangements to provide security to members of the minority community and their places of worship, etc.; undertake comprehensive measures for relief and rehabilitation of the victims and other affected persons, including measures for reconstruction/ repair of the residential and other structures that were burnt/ damaged during the violence; and, take effective steps to create an environment in which people who had to leave their homes could return at the earliest.

On request of the Government of Orissa and in view of the situation, the Ministry of Home Affairs provided 53 Companies of Central Para-Military Forces (CPMF) to the State Government. Companies of the CPMF continue to be deployed in the State to assist the local police. One helicopter was also provided to the State Government to enable the movement of officials and force personnel.

The Minister of State in the Ministry of Home Affairs, Shri Sriprakash Jaiswal visited Orissa on 27.8.2008 and the Union Home Minister visited Orissa on 3.9.2008.

A team of Central Ministers led by Shri Sharad Pawar, Minister of Agriculture, Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution visited Orissa from 17 to 19th November 2008 in the context of the recent communal disturbances in the State.

ACTION TAKEN BY STATE GOVERNMENT

The State Government has reported that the following actions/steps have been taken by them in the context of the incidents of communal violence in the State: