

To

The State Human Rights Commission

Bhubaneswar

Orissa

## **Orissa burning again**

**Bhubaneswar**

**Dt.26<sup>th</sup> August 2008.**

### **Stocktaking of the situation in State of Orissa**

Violence re-erupted within the Indian state of Orissa today. The attacks performed by Hindu extremist groups are just one link in a long chain of events that have continued to strain Hindu-Christian relations within the state.

Today's attacks were triggered by the killing of a prominent Hindu leader this past weekend. On Saturday, August 23<sup>rd</sup>, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati along with five other people was shot dead in his Jalaspeta Ashram near Tumudibandha (Kandhamal District, Orissa). A Naxalite group has claimed the responsibility saying that he deceived people on the basis of religion and ethnicity. The Swami was 84 years old and was especially known for violently opposing cow slaughter and conversion. He opposed the extreme naxalite group. He is also believed to have orchestrated the Christmas 2007 riot against Christians in the Kandhamal district of Orissa which has left thousands of Christians homeless to this day. Since the December attacks Hindu-Christian relations have remained tense within Kandhamal. In retaliation for the August 23<sup>rd</sup> killings the VHP and its allied political families called for a bandh (road blockade) for the 25<sup>th</sup> of August. In the meantime a judicial enquiry is ordered into the incident, though many opposition parties have called for the resignation of Naveen Patnaik's for failing to maintain law and order.

In retaliation for the Swami's death, the extremist wing of the VHP has engaged in a series of attacks against Christians which started on 23<sup>rd</sup> and are expected to continue.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> evening immediately after the news of murder of Swami Laxmanada Saraswati spread in the district, two sisters of Precious Blood congregation at Kothaguda who were on their way to Berhampur were stopped near G. Udayagiri, pulled out from the vehicle. Vehicle was then set on fire and the driver was severely beaten up. Almost at the same time a vehicle carrying HM sisters near Ainthapally in Sambalpur, a prayer chapel at Tentuliapadar in Sundargarh was also burned and destroyed. With these incidents, the stories of violence, abuse and attacks continue with several churches, church institutions, priests, Nuns, Christian people and their houses being attacked, abused, ransacked, and torched.

As the impact of the news started getting visible across the state, government got into action by announcing prohibitory orders (144 Section) in Kandhamal district. This was also a preparatory

action by the state government ahead of the 12-hour bandh called by the VHP and other affiliates of the Sangh Parivar on 25<sup>th</sup> August to protest the killing.

On Sunday morning 24<sup>th</sup> August 2008, prayers in many churches were disrupted with very few participants attending the mass fearing attacks.

From the same day attacks in Kandhamal district intensified. It was the turn of Janvikas office like many other offices which were burnt to ashes during the violence in December 2007. Jan Vikas is a social wing of the Archdiocese of Cuttack Bhubaneswar and works towards empowerment of the most marginalised in the districts. A mob attacked, ransacked the office and set fire burning down three four wheelers, six motor cycles, all the important records and documentation of the organisation and office equipment. This incident took place at 5.30 in the evening.

After this, the mob continued their assaults at Divya Jyoti Pastoral Centre by gutting, burning and looting the same at about 6 p.m. The same group entered the Baliguda presbytery, convent and hostel damaging the properties.

In similar attacks, the Roman Catholic Church at Kanjamedi was attacked and vandalized at 6.30 p.m. The Diocesan Church at Kanjamedi was ransacked and other three Pentecostals churches were destroyed in the same way at 6.45 p.m. by the same group. In the late evening, about 12 Dalit Christian shops were burnt to ashes in Raikia.

On 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008 as the Bandh led to many protests, ratha rokos, tyre burning etc., the following incidents of violence shook the whole state and the Christian community. At 7.00 a.m, Phulbani Church and presbytery were vandalized and ransacked. Srasanda MC Brother's residence was attacked and the patients who came there to get treatment were beaten up and the VHP activists continued to burn houses and household articles of Christian families in the area. Eight houses were completely destroyed in this incident.

On the same day at 10.30 a.m houses of Christian families in Christiansahi in Balliguda were destroyed and ransacked. The details of damage and the numbers are not available as yet. In a similar incident houses in Nuasahi were set on fire destroying the whole street where Christian families lived. This incident took place at 11.30 a.m.

Two boys studying in the church run hostel were caught in Baliguda and their heads were tonsured.

In the afternoon at about 1.00 P.M, Mr. Jamaj Parichha's house was attacked and his vehicles were set ablaze, doors were cut into pieces and he was beaten up by the mob. He sustained severe head injury and is hospitalised (place is not disclosed because of the security reasons). It is said that he is one of the primary targets of the hindutva forces in the area. His wife being a Hindu pleaded the mob to spare him and even showed that she practices Hinduism but they showed no mercy continued beating him up and said "he is a Christian and we will kill him".

As this incident happened, houses of the staffs of Jan Vikas (Diocesan organisation under the Arch Diocese of Cuttack- Bhubaneswar) were also burnt. Five staffs are directly affected by this violence and all of them fled their villages and went into hiding.

In a very similar way, at 2 p.m. the house of Mr. Puren Nayak resident of Bhudansahi was attacked and burnt into ashes. All his assets were removed from the house and were set on fire in a pile. . As the violence continued in the village, mob ransacked the Christian houses burnt all their belongings. The women (Hindu) in the community were identifying the houses to be burnt down as the mob followed their instructions. Women also supplied kerosene to encourage the mob.

We will observe that in such incidents of burning and ransacking, the strategy used by the mob is very similar. The household articles and assets are brought outside the house and are set on fire. This is because under Indian Penal code section 436, the person/persons involved in burning the house are punishable with 7 years+ of rigorous imprisonment and this falls under the category of a non bailable offence. And when the assets/belonging are brought outside the house and burnt, it's a bailable offense and the punishment is limited to 6 months to one year of imprisonment. This offense falls under IPC 435.

Fr. Challan, Director of Pastoral centre, Kanjamendi and Sr. Meena, administrator of the centre which was burnt and ransacked on 24<sup>th</sup> escaped from the centre to hide in Mr. Jashawanta Pradhan's house. On 25<sup>th</sup>, mob having the information about this forcefully entered the house dragging both of them outside. They were beaten up badly and taken to the police fundi (smaller unit of police station) in the area. It is reported that they were tied up in the fundi and were threatened of being burnt alive. There is no update about their condition since then.

Paul Pradhan who heads an NGO in the district and works for the rights of dalits and adivasis was also attacked in his house, office was destroyed completely. It is also reported that most of the Christian houses in Tikabali block were attacked and set fire. Numbers are still unknown.

One person called Vikram Nayak was cut into pieces at Tiagian under G Udaygiri police station. Other two sustained injuries while no medication facilities have been made available and it is reported that both two persons were died. In Tiangia village under the same police station limits, houses of Christian families were set on fire and people have fled to jungle. It was reported that the miscreants have been following them and were attacking.

On 25<sup>th</sup> late night, Sankrakhhol Parish church and presbytery were set fire and ransacked, the parish priest Fr. Alexandar Chandi left to the nearest forest and he was saved. It is reported that his most of the assets are set fire and church is completely destroyed.

Fr. Bernard Digal who had gone to visit Fr. Alexandar Chandi was held up in Sankrakhhol parish when the mob attacked the church. His Marshal Jeep was set fire. While narrating the incident Fr. Bernard said that when the mob enters the church premise they left to the forest and hid themselves. They were safe but the vehicle was set fire. He walked around 10.K.M to reach one of his relations house. As he was walking the attackers were use to see him but could not recognise.

On 25<sup>th</sup> August late night the Convent of St. Joseph's at Sankrakhole was attacked and ransacked. Sisters also left to the forest and have saved their life.

On 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008, Mr. Abenswar Digal's house is set fire, under Tikabali Police station.

On 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008, at about 11.00 p.m 23 houses of Gumagarh, under Bisipadsad Police station were attacked and ransacked.

In Raikia, attacks are on as of 11.30 p.m. and the nature of damage is yet to be known. As per the first information report reveals that on 25<sup>th</sup> August late evening at Raikia 17 Christian houses were ransacked. Most of the house articles and assets were removed from the house and gathered outside and set fire. As per the first hand report the victims identified were Mr. Bijay Parichha, Mr. R.K.Nayak, Mr. Joseph Nayak, Mr. Susant Dal Behera, Mr. Santosh Nayak, Mr. Santun Nayak, Mr. Harihar Das, Mr. Mosesh Nayak, Mr. Prakash Nayak, Mr. Raju Parichha and others.

On 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008 late night The Ambassador Vehicle of Mr. Sukant Nayak, Director *Shabara* (NGO), was set fire.

On 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008 late night The Office of Karuna (NGO), under Raikia Police station were ransacked.

On 25<sup>th</sup> afternoon the Pentecostal church at Budamaha, under Raikia Polic station was vandalized and ransacked.

On 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008, Masadkia church was vandalized and ransacked.

On 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008, two Pentecostal churches were vandalized and ransacked.

On 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008, Pismaha Church, under Raikia Police station was vandalized and ransacked.

On 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008, Baptist church and R.C Church at Mondakia under Raikia Police station was vandalized and ransacked.

On 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008, Mdahupanga Church, under Raikia Police station was vandalized and ransacked.

As the violence continues, most of the parish priests and sisters are still not reachable and their conditions are not known. The houses are being burnt in several places in Phulbani, Srasanada, Pobingia, Balliguda and Konjamendi.

In Bhubaneswar, the impact of the Bandh was also felt severely by people with most of the office being closed, shops stayed closed as well. Transportation was totally disrupted and tyres were burnt in many places across the city. There were huge rallies by the supporters of VHP and Bajrangdal on the main roads and junctions.

There were also some cases of attacks reported within the city and most of these attacks were on churches and church related institutions. From early morning of 25<sup>th</sup> onwards violent mobs made several attempts to enter the compound of Catholic Church and Archbishop's house in the city with a view to attack. Policemen deployed at the scene disbursed the mob and stopped them from entering the campus. Angry mob threw stones at the guest house of Archbishop's House, damaging some windows panes.

Another group of fundamentalists entered presbytery in Duburi parish, managed by the SVDs and destroyed and damaged property. Two priests of the said parish Fr. Xavier and Fr. Simon are missing and their where about are yet to be found. Institutions like St. Arnold's School (Kalinga Bihar);

NISWASS have suffered some damages while one Baptist Church in Akamra Jila in the city was also damaged.

Situation seems to be very serious and worsening by every hour with violence being intensified. From across the districts, people are trying to flee to the safer places. But nothing seems to be safe as of now. The violence can turn more intense as the people return after Swami's cremation.

Other events that took place in Rayagada, Gajapati, Koraput and other south Orissa districts left Christians and Christian institutions throughout the state fearful. Father Obed Khura of Sunebeda received three threatening calls. While he approached the Sunebeda OIC, he was refused police protection and was sent back with assurance that the school he runs will not be attacked and was instructed to stay away from the school.

In Muniguda (closer to Tumudibandha, Rayagada district), as the mass was coming to an end two jeep loads of youth from the town entered the compound and started shouting slogans. The police arrived on time and prevented the situation from escalating. Three policemen have been deployed at the gate which has been destroyed. The Church and Convent at Muniguda could not be saved. Around 80 inmates under the leadership of Fr. Pius Ekka and Sr. Marina Chacko have taken refuge in the forest. This happened in spite of the fact that Fr. Marshal Mihir Upasi was constantly in touch with the State Control Office of the Orissa Police and the SP of Rayagada. The mob first torched the police Jeep in Muniguda and then proceeded to the Convent and Church. On the previous day (24<sup>th</sup> of August) the mob threatened the Fathers after Sunday Mass. The mob sought out the houses holding Christian families and managed to destroy some of them. As a consequence allowing refuge to families has placed others at risk.

As the mob moved on from Bhairaguda, 3 km away from Muniguda to seek shelter in a school while raining, the villagers from the Hindu community fed them. This took place at 7.20 pm.

Expecting an attack Fr. Manickthan, Bhawanipatna asked for protection, the SP expressed his inability to do anything due to the size of the mob. When Father suggested the SP on announcing curfew in the area and stop the mob's movement, the angry SP retorted saying that Fr. need not give orders to him. Later in the forenoon both the ADM and the SP visited the Church compound and inspected the law and order situation. The Malankara hostel was attacked in Bhawanipatna, not far from the Catholic Church, and many children have been badly hurt.

Missionaries of Charity from Dharmagarh, unaware of the events from the previous night, were travelling to Bhawanipatna for Sunday Mass. Near the jail in Bhawanipatna town their ambulance was intercepted and pelted with stones. All the sisters sustained minor injuries from the stones and broken glass. The police arrived and sent them back in the same damaged vehicle to Dharmagarh. Sr. Suma and Sr. Nirmala have been informed of this and the district administration has assured them of protection.

A group of police are guarding the Church in Jeypore after the threat of oncoming attacks. The police informed Fr. Bimol Nayak that some 200 people are preparing to attack the Church. Fr. Bimol Nayak and another Brother have taken shelter with nearby friends. Around 24 policemen are guarding the church compound in Mohana after road blocks started on Sunday evening. Additionally, a group of 9 police men are safeguarding the Church in Goudogotho and the Cathedral.

It is also reported that the Lutheran Church in Malkangiri, Padua, and Gunupur were destroyed. Fathers and Sisters along with the children in Gumuda have left the mission stations fearing attacks.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> as the Congregation was coming out of the Church in Malkangiri, a group of angry youth harassed them and forced them to recite Bande Mataram. 22 Christian Families of Shanti Nagar (Givindapur) at the foothill of Taptapani Hot Spring were also assaulted and forced to leave the village.

In Boudh also, a group of protestors entered the parish and destroyed things and property. Communal tension was high also in other districts across the state with several incidents of attacks against the people as well as property. In Balasore, Balsore Social Service Society (official social wing of the Balasore diocese) was attacked three times during the day on 25<sup>th</sup> August. The mob shouting slogans broke all the window panes and destroyed a statue of Mother Mary which was installed in the BSSS office campus. Badrak also had few incidents of attacks but the details are not known.

Hindu protestors attacked Jyoti Niketan of Baipariguda in Koraput district in the afternoon of 25<sup>th</sup> August. Father Joy Areckal had to run into the forest and the hostel children and his social workers are subjected to insults and intimidation. The Mission has been destroyed along with all that it contained. A sad twist to the story is that the police along with the people seized wooden planks in spite of the fact that the carpenters who are building a new hostel building in the campus there claimed that it was bought by them. Consequently, a criminal case may be filed against Fr. Areckal under the Forest Act.

Mr. Routo Desinayak and Ms. Kalyani, who works for an agro-entrepreneurship program for SWAD at Boipariguda were also arrested under the forest protection act. Though the Police Officer and the Block Development Officer was not willing, the mob forced the police to tie Mr. Desinayak with a rope and drag him through the street up to the Forest Office. Miss Kalyani being a woman was spared of this ordeal.

In Govindapally, close to Boipariguda, protestors entered the Convent and damaged the grotto of Our Lady and the Cross of the Church yard. In the same district Fathers and Sisters in Koraput, Jeypore and Semiliguda are in hiding.

In Bargarh district, a mob of about 2000 people went around ransacking many church institutions and there were serious attacks on priests and nuns. In Padampur, Fr. Edward Sequira was attacked and was beaten up brutally. He survived with serious head injury and still unconscious. "His life is under critical still" said Fr. Alphonse Toppo, Vicar General of Sambalpur diocese. The institution which caters to children affected by Leprosy was attacked and burnt. While the institution burnt to ashes, along with it also burnt was the auxiliary nurse Rajani Majhi 20 year old, who took care of the children in the institute and was studying in Padampur Women's College.

Sundargarh also saw many such incidents of church burning and attacks on church properties damages are yet to be ascertained.

In Sambalpur district, Hand Maid Sister's residence of Ainthapalli has suffered damage while priests are given warnings of attacks in Madhupur, Badibahal area. Stone pelting and breaking of window panes of churches and related institutions was a common scene across the state.

A Roman Catholic cemetery was damaged by an irate mob in Sambalpur town. The mob also pelted the stones at the Oriya Baptist Church near G.M College. Burning of motorbike belonging to a pastor Pravakar Munna, ransacking of a prayer house in Chiplima and attempt to attack a mission institution were also reported.

In continuation to all this violence across the state, Dibyasingh Pariccha, PRO and Secretary, Justice and Peace Commission (Arch diocese of Cuttack Bhubaneswar) has condemned the killing of Swami Laxmananda Saraswati and appealed for a CBI enquiry into the incident. He requested that culprits responsible for the incident be punished instead of attacking the whole Christian community.

He appealed to the government to deploy adequate forces to safeguard life and property of Christian people.

On 26<sup>th</sup> August 2008, at about 11.30 a.m the mob is attacking at Badimunda Village, under Tikabali police station in Kandhamal District. It is reported Roman Catholic Church and 5 individual houses were set fire.

It is reported that people are suffering from with out food, cloth and shelter. Last night, there was heavy rain and people were in the forest with the wet cloth. However, the condition of the children and women were indescribable. School children are deprived of their studies.

Kindly pray for us so that peace and harmony may return soon. Thank you very much for your solidarity.

End

Dibkar Parichha