

PRESS STATEMENT

New Delhi, 18th December 2014

We meet you at a time when the entire world, every parent on earth, is grieving the loss of 132 innocent children shot dead in Peshawar in Pakistan. That such brutality is seen in the 21st century is evidence of the dangers of fanaticism and extremism hate and violence acting in the name of faith is a challenge to society at large. We extend to the people of Pakistan and specially its children our heartfelt condolences. We remain in solidarity with them as we pray for the souls of the dead students.

We are reminded again of the message of Jesus Christ to eschew hate, to work for peace, to forgive those who hurt us, and to love our neighbours.

This Christmas season, therefore, we come to you with a heavy heart and great concern of the sense of apprehension and fear in our community at the incidents of violence against our Churches and personnel in various parts of the country, and specially in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and now in the National Capital Territory of Delhi where the St. Sebastian's Church in Dlishad Garden, East Delhi was torched in what we think is an act of malicious arson on 1st December 2014.

The gutting of the St. Sebastian's Church, as well as the other incidents of targeted violence in other parts of the country, speak of extreme police and administrative impunity and disregard not only to the sentiments and religious feelings of our community but also the guarantees of the Constitution of India.

These acts of violence do not stand alone, nor are they isolated incidents. They are quite part of a series of interconnected actions by various non-State actors closely associated with the ruling dispensation. The official celebrations of a good governance day on Christmas day as detailed in government circulars sent to educational institutions throughout the country to organise compulsory events on a day that is holy to us, Members of the Union Council of Ministers have called for national laws against conversion, and a Common Civil Code, politically targeting the Christian and Muslim communities without saying it in so many words.

What is more dangerous, and threat to national peace and harmony, is the well thought out campaign in the name of Ghar Wapsi, which is organised not just by fringe elements, but by senior members of Parliament belonging to the ruling party. Their pronouncements question the identity and patriotism of India's several religious minorities. The fact that people are being offered Below Poverty Line Cards and other privileges within the domain of government adds to our fear that these elements enjoy official patronage.

It is being made clear to the minorities that while the Government won its mandate on a platform of "development and good governance", the radical groups see it is an endorsement of their programme of hate and religious nationalism which they call Hindu Rashtra. This is a blatant attempt to sabotage the Constitution of India that guarantees freedom of faith, adhering to the United Nations Bill of Rights. Article 25 (i) assures the freedom to every citizen of India to profess, practice and propagate one's religion and beliefs. This was the result of a great debate that took place in the Constituent Assembly.

With its wonderful diversity and ancient cultural, linguistic and ethnic identity, the State maintains equal respect for all faiths, and for people who profess no faith. In a secular and democratic India, there is no place for a state religion. India is not a theocracy. Religion has no place in the national political discourse.

In the states where dubious and ironically named Freedom of Religion Acts have been used against minorities, their overwhelming powers have allowed the police and bureaucracy to harass, arrest and punish clergy, religious workers and institutions. If that was not enough, the non State actors and members of religious-political groups have felt empowered to coerce and terrorise the people, often settling personal scores or indulging in land grab.

The media may already be aware but, we would like to highlight some of the recent incidents of targeted violence and attacks on Christians in the country which we have already conveyed to the Prime Minister and Union Home Minister in our memorandum:

On Sunday, 30th November 2014, two house churches in Anuppur district of Madhya Pradesh were attacked. Chhattisgarh has particularly witnessed regular and repeated attacks on the fundamental rights of the minority Christian community. Most recently, according to the media and local sources, local

Hindutva groups such as the VHP are pressurising local Catholic missionaries to put up pictures of Goddess Saraswati in their educational institutions. The Catholic schools are also under pressure to rename the principals in their schools, as “Pracharya”, or “Up-pracharya”, instead of the term “Father”, which is usually used.

Some of the other incidents briefly outlined below are representative of the hostility and discrimination being faced by Christians across India.

1. Social Boycott

- The entry of and propaganda by non-Hindu missionaries, especially Christians, is banned in more than 50 villages of Chhattisgarh’s Bastar region by the local gram panchayats since late May.
- In Deggarrh district, Odisha several tribal Christian families were excommunicated on 28 April allegedly at the behest of Hindu extremists. The three Christian families were excommunicated and deprived from enjoying common facilities of the village road, water and forest land because of their faith in Christ. The well commonly used by the Christians was polluted by adding filth to it. And the Christians have been forbidden to mix or talk to anybody, to take part in any social functions or walk on the main road. The extremists also threatened to snatch away the Govt. land allotted to the Christians, to cancel their BPL Cards and demolish their houses if they do not renounce Christ.

2. Physical Assaults

- On 16 June, a mob of religious extremists brutally beat up Christians and 10 believers including two women who were later rushed to the hospital in Sirisguda, Bastar town, Jagdalpur, Chhattisgarh. About 100 Christians who were denied rations for two months for their faith in Christ were beaten up by a mob. At about 1 pm, Christians from 52 families came together before the district Food Inspector office when the mob rushed in and started to beat the Christians indiscriminately. The mob beat up the Christians with sticks, kicked and punched them and hurled stones at those who were trying to escape from the scene. Two women were pulled to the ground while the perpetrators stood on them and hit their genital organs. No FIR was registered against members of the mob.
- Religious-political extremists locked up a church on June 5 after they beat up a Christian family in Balwanazir, Kaliyanganj, Bihar. The mob comprising of Hindu extremists beat up Sadanandan Singh and his family for their faith in Christ in May and June and finally locked up the church of the Indian Evangelical Team. Singh and his family were dragged on the road and the entire family including two minor girls were beaten up mercilessly. The extremists have locked up the church and told Singh that he is not allowed to pray in the future in the village.

3. Desecration of and Restrictions on House Churches or Building Churches.

- Local religious political groups threatened to harm Pastor Bhikanlal Dhurvey several times for conducting prayer meetings in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. However, the pastor continued to conduct worship services and later started to build a prayer hall in his land. Subsequently, the extremists filed a police complaint against the pastor of illegal construction. The construction has since been stopped and prayers are now being conducted in the homes of local Christians

- On 18th May in Kundapur, Karnataka the properties of two churches were allegedly damaged by unidentified miscreants. An ornamental pot at the entrance of the Holy Rosary church was broken and a signpost leading to St. Antony Church in Koteswar also was uprooted.

- On 29 April, three chapels in Irinjalakuda diocese were damaged after allegedly police cleared the way for the "Way of the Cross" procession of the Saint Anthony's Catholic Church. Earlier, on 11 April, extremists had blocked the procession of St Antony's Catholic Church. The police intervened and cleared the passage for the procession as this was the traditional practise for several years and the local temple administration has given permission for the same.

India is a land where different religious faiths have long since flourished and our founding fathers made special efforts to ensure that the rights of all are safeguarded irrespective of our religious beliefs, gender or caste. India is committed to secularism and any attempt to weaken the socio-religious fabric of the nation must be dealt with swiftly and effectively.

We hope and pray that such discrimination and targeted violence will be ended by strong political will and administrative action. We the Christians who are a small religious community need assurance from the government that we are protected and secure and safe in our motherland.

We pray for our fellow citizens and wish them great joy as we greet them this Christmas.
God bless India.

Signed

1. Archbishop Anil Couto, Archbishop of Delhi
2. Archbishop Kuriakose Bharanikulangara, Bishop of the Faridabad Syro-Malabar Catholic Eparchy
3. Bishop Jacob Barnabas, Syro-Malankara Catholic church
4. Archbishop Youhanon Mar Demetros, Malankara Orthodox Church of India
5. Bishop Abraham Mar Paulus, Bishop of Marthoma Church
6. Bishop Subodh Mondal, Bishop of Methodist Church of India
7. Bishop Samantroy, Moderator, CNI
8. Bishop Simon John, Bishop of Believers Church
9. Dr. John Dayal, former National President, all India catholic Union, Member, NIC
10. Rev. Richard Howell, General Secretary, Evangelical Fellowship of India and secretary of National United Christian Forum
11. Rev Vijayesh Lal, Director Religious Liberty Commission, EFI