

PRESS STATEMENT

AFTER UNPRECEDENTED PROTEST BY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN THE NATIONAL CAPITAL, GOVERNMENT APPOINTS SPECIAL INVESTIGATING TEAM [SIT] OF DELHI CRIME BRANCH TO PROBE BURNING OF ST. SEBASTSIAN'S CHURCH IN EAST DELHI; ASSURE SPECIAL SECURITY MEASURES FOR CHRISTMAS SEASON

RELIGIOUS LEADERS SAY JUDICIAL COMMISSION NECESSARY TO PROBE HATE SPEECHES AND TARGETTED VIOLOENCE AGAINST CHRISTIANS IN SEVERAL STATES
NEW DELHI, 2nd December 2014.

In response to an unprecedented protest by the Christian community of India in the National Capital, New Delhi this morning, the State government has set up a Special Investigating Team under the supervision of the Crime Branch of Delhi police, to investigate Monday's targeted arson which gutted the St. Sebastian's Catholic Church in Dilshad Garden in East Delhi.

But in their memorandums to the Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi, and Union Home Minister Mr. Rajnath Singh, the community leadership pressed its demand for a Judicial Enquiry by at least a sitting or retired Judge of a High court into the Delhi arson against a church, but also the hate speeches and targeted violence against the community, its churches, religious priests, pastors and nuns, and its institutions in several states, particularly Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The memorandums brought several such cases to the notice of the Prime Minister and the Home Minister. [A copy of the Memorandum is attached with this Press Statement.]

Delhi has not seen an outpouring of anguish and hurt as at the protest demonstration at Police Headquarters at the busy ITO in New Delhi. Archbishops, Bishops, priests representing every denomination and thousands of young and old people from every part of the country dared a massive police blockade to register their protest at the burning of St. Sebastian's Church which many saw as an act of terrorism against them... Among them were Catholic Nuns, principals and teachers of Educational institutions, hundreds of women and youth. The peaceful rally blocked the arterial road linking New Delhi with East Delhi for two hours till the Special Commissioner for Law and order, Mr. Deepak Mishra on behalf of the police commissioner personally conveyed them the assurance of the SIT and security measures.

Archbishop Anil Couto told the rally they would wait to see the Central and State governments' action before deciding the next course of action. The burning of the church had created a sense of insecurity, and the government had to show by its action that it was concerned and would ensure security of all minorities, specially the small Christian community in their motherland where they have been living peacefully for 2,000 years. The government had to end targeted violence and impunity so that the Constitutional guarantees of freedom of faith for all citizens were seen on the ground. We are hoping the Prime Minister and his government will reaffirm this commitment.

Later, Lt. Governor, Mr. Najeeb Jung assured Archbishop Anil Couto of a zero tolerance against targeted and communal violence in the national capital. He said he was directing the Police Commissioner to see that the investigations into the burning of the church were carried out expeditiously and that all preventive measures were taken. The state government, he said, was deeply concerned about such issues.

The delegation which met the Police Commissioner, Mr. Bhim Sain Bassi, and which also signed the memorandum to the Prime Minister, the Union Home Minister, and the Lt Governor, consisted of the following:

Archbishop Anil Couto, Archbishop of Delhi, Archbishop Kuriakose Bharanikulangara, Archbishop of the Faridabad Syro-Malabar Catholic Eparchy, Bishop Jacob Barnabas, Syro-Malankara Catholic church, Dr. John Dayal, former National President, All India catholic Union, Member, National Integration Council, Mr Alwan Masih, General Secretary of the Church of North India, Bishop Simon John of the Believers Church, Rev. Richard Howell, General Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India, Mr. A.C. Michael, immediate past Christian member, Delhi Minorities Commission, Mr. Swamydas Chinnappan, National Secretary, All India Catholic Union, Mr. Jenis Francis, President, Federation of Catholic Associations of Delhi, Rev. Vijayesh Lal, Director Religious Liberties Commission, EFI, Fr. Mathew Koiyckal, Chancellor of the Delhi Archdiocese, Fr Savaraimuthu, Dr. Dominic Emmanuel, SVD.

The protest rally was addressed, among others, by Archbishop Anil Couto, former Delhi CNI Bishop Karam Masih, Fr. Stanley Kozhichara, and Dr. John Dayal, Fr. Dominic Emmanuel, and senior representatives and clergy of several denominations.

TEXT OF MEMORANDUM TO PRIME MINISTER, HOME MINISTER OF INDIA AND LET. GOVERNOR OF DELHI

2nd December 2014

It is with a heavy heart and great concern that we address this memorandum to you to bring to your attention incidents of violence against our Churches and personnel in the country, the latest of which is the arson in the Catholic Archdiocese of Delhi's St Sebastian's Church in Dlishad Garden, East Delhi in the early hours of 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 injured religious feelings of our community but also the guarantees of the Constitution of India. Delhi is governed directly by the Union Government's Ministry of Home Affairs which makes it all the more serious.

1. We call upon you to order an immediate judicial enquiry by at least a High court serving or retired judge to ascertain the facts of this malicious act and the circumstances surrounding the polarisation that is taking place.

2. We also request you to ensure that the Delhi administration repairs the entirely gutted church so that the faithful of the capital region can celebrate the Christmas Midnight Mass prayer service on the night of 24th December 2014.

3. It is a matter of deep regret that the local police officers paid little heed to our repeated requests that the scene of the crime be investigated properly. No senior officer visited the spot till late in the afternoon, and the forensic team came only by the evening. In addition to the judicial enquiry, an internal departmental enquiry also must be ordered to identify officers and men guilty of dereliction of duty.

4. We are confident that you will ensure that the guilty are traced by the police at the earliest and charges brought against them for arson, hurting the religious sentiments of the Christian community and for attempts to create religious discord.

The details of the arson in the St. Sebastian's Church, Dilshad Garden, East Delhi, and incidents in other parts of the country are as follows;

St. Sebastian's Church in Dilshad Garden was constructed in 2001 and is among the biggest churches in the area. The fire was reported early this morning. The entire interior, including the Altar, the Holy Bible and Cross were reduced to ashes.

On the complaint of Church priest Fr. Anthony Francis, the police have registered an FIR against unknown outsiders for causing the fire with malicious intent. Senior officers of Delhi police, the Special Branch and the Forensic Crime unit came to the spot after many hours, and once the agitated members of the Catholic community blocked the roads in the area. Samples were retrieved from the inside of the church, which still smelt of fuel oil.

Till late in the evening, police could not say they had made any progress in their investigations.

Addressing the media, Archbishop Couto said apart from the judicial enquiry, the government must repair the building before Christmas, ensure that policemen guilty of dereliction of duty are punished, and special police investigation teams are set up to trace the guilty.

II. In Madhya Pradesh

On Sunday, 30th November 2014, two house churches in Annupur district of Madhya Pradesh were attacked.

III. Chhattisgarh:

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 politico organisations 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 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 religious 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 cancelled their BPL Cards and demolished 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 beat up Sadanandan Singh and his family for their faith in Christ on 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 Kundupur, 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 father 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 effective.

We hope and pray that such discrimination and targeted violence will be ended by strong political will and administrative action.

You and your government are poised in a unique moment in the history of the nation to ensure that all people, irrespective of faith, feel secure. Small religious communities such as the Christians need to be reassured they are protected and are secure and safe in their motherland.

We continue to pray for you and the government. We pray for India and for the welfare of all its people.