

Christians Attacked In Orissa

WASHINGTON (BWA) A global Baptist leader decried attacks targeting Christians in the state of Orissa in eastern India. More than 600 churches have reportedly been demolished, 4,000 Christians forced to flee from their villages and at least 25 killed as a result of religious violence.

Riots erupted after a Hindu religious leader and four of his associates were murdered in the Kandhamal District of Orissa on Saturday. Although a Maoist group claimed responsibility for the murders, supporters of the slain leader claim that Christians were behind the killings. Hindu fundamentalists retaliated with a series of attacks against Christians in retaliation.

“Unfortunate events have taken place in Orissa in recent days,” said Neville Callam, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance. “These began with the senseless killing of Hindu Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati on Aug. 23.”

“I am disappointed by the false claim that Christians have responsibility for this murder and I am saddened by the atrocities being visited on Christians in Orissa,” Callam said.

Since Sunday churches, schools and other institutions, prayer rooms, and homes of Christians have been ransacked, burned and destroyed. Christians have been assaulted and reportedly at least 25 have been killed, some of them burnt alive or cut into pieces.

In an Aug. 26 e-mail to the BWA, Swarupananda Patra, general secretary of the All Orissa Baptist Churches Federation, said “All Christian villages [are] empty in Kandhamal as Christians, old and young, sick and pregnant mothers [are] hiding in forests exposed to the non-stop monsoon rains without food.”

He reported that Kandhamal is the hardest hit, with at least eight Christians killed and almost all Christian homes demolished, but Christians in the districts of

Balasore, Bargarh and Kalahandi are also experiencing severe persecution.

P. Ramesh Kumar, principal of the Balasore Technical School, reported to the BWA on Aug. 25: "We are all under immense danger and threat from these groups. Please continue to uphold us in your prayer particularly for the safety of Christian brothers and sisters who are now hiding themselves in jungles."

Callam appealed to governing authorities in India to intervene to save lives of victims of the current crisis.

"Respect for the principle of religious liberty and the sacredness of human life requires nothing less," Callam said. "I also appeal to all Baptists worldwide to pray God's protection for our brothers and sisters in Orissa."

Patra also appealed for prayer. "Now we have no request except prayer from our Baptist world as we do not know how to face tomorrow," he said.

This is not the first time Christians in Orissa have experienced violent attacks. In December 2007, Hindu militants burned approximately 90 churches and 600 homes, killing an estimated 10 persons.

There are several Baptist conventions and unions in Orissa state that are member bodies of the BWA, with total membership in Orissa of nearly 500,000 baptized believers and approximately 3,500 churches.