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Written statement* submitted by European Centre for Law and Justice, The / Centre Européen pour le droit, les Justice et les droits de l'homme, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[1 February 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Requesting that the United Nations Intervenes to Stop the Violence against Christians in India

1. Introduction

India is currently ranked as the eleventh worst country for Christians.(1) European Centre for Law and Justice, The / Centre Européen pour le droit, les Justice et les droits de l'homme (ECLJ) has filed numerous reports with the Human Rights Council (HRC) documenting instances of persecution, including but not limited to, Christian churches being attacked and demolished, worship services disrupted, Bibles confiscated, and pastors and members of congregations beaten and arrested under false accusations of forced conversions.(2) Approximately 1198 instances of Christian persecution in India were recorded in 2022, a 157% increase from 2021.(3) In at least 350 cases, Christians were arrested on false conversion charges.(4) The Government of India, however, has done nothing to protect its vulnerable citizens. In fact, Hindu extremists often carry out such acts with the authorities' acquiescence and sometimes active support. As such, both state and non-state actors are equally contributing to the persecution of Christians. Most of the Christians who are attacked belong to lower castes and the Adivasi (indigenous, tribal people) communities, and much of the violence, as noted above, occurs under the pretext of preventing "fraudulent" or "forcible" religious conversions, which violate anti-conversion laws. These laws have the sole purpose of stopping "low caste" Hindus and tribal communities from converting to other religions. Moreover, India bans foreigners who attempt to help these marginalized communities from travelling to India. This dire situation demands the immediate attention of the international community.

2. Background

People considered low born by the "higher caste" Hindus have been persecuted for millennia in the Indian sub-continent. The Hindu caste system divides people into four castes. Two groups, Dalits (formerly called untouchables) and Adivasis are outside the caste system. Even though India has officially outlawed discrimination based on a person's caste, it is still very much prevalent in the country. During the British Raj and with the arrival of Christian missionaries in the Indian subcontinent, many people belonging to the "lower castes" and the Dalit community converted to Christianity.

As the European Centre for Law and Justice, The / Centre Européen pour le droit, les Justice et les droits de l'homme (ECLJ) has noted in previous reports, much of the modern-day persecution of Christians occurs through the misuse of anti-conversion laws and at the hands of the Hindu majority. Christians are a particular target of the fundamentalist Hindus because Christianity undermines India's millennia old caste system.(5) As Archbishop Joseph D'Souza of India has also noted, "[i]t's ultimately about the rights of low caste and the untouchables."(6) Those belonging to the "upper castes" fear that becoming Christian will free "lower castes" from their social and political "low" status.

Violence against Christians and other minorities is primarily perpetrated by members of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) paramilitary wing called Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), who adhere to the Hindu nationalist ideology called Hindutva.(7) Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a longtime member of the RSS.(8) The Hindutva extremists aim to cleanse the country of Christian presence and influence.

3. Violations

On January 16, 2023, right wing Hindu extremists attacked and assaulted a group of Christian teachers and students (twenty-four men and fourteen women) on an educational tour, suspecting them as missionaries on a religious conversion tour.(9) The attackers got on the train at one station and continued to beat the Christians for over twenty minutes until they reached the next station.(10)

Two districts in the state of Chhattisgarh have become a hotbed for violent attacks against the Adivasi Christians. On January 2, 2023, a mob attacked and vandalized the Sacred Heart Church in Narayanpur district.⁽¹¹⁾ They destroyed church property, including the crucifix. The attackers belonged to a group called “Sarva Advasi Samaj that is opposed to tribal people adopting other faiths especially Christianity and Islam.”⁽¹²⁾

Just a day before, on January 1, 2023, a mob of hundreds of Hindu extremists gathered and attacked Christians in Gorra village in Chhattisgarh state and beat them with “sticks, legs, fists, bricks, and stones.”⁽¹³⁾ Several people were rushed to the hospital. Some of the attackers identified one of the injured men at the hospital and threatened to call the mob again.⁽¹⁴⁾ The injured man’s son said that they did not return to their village.⁽¹⁵⁾ He further stated: ““Accusing us of following a foreign religion, and leaving the tribal culture, they gave us a choice to recant our faith or leave our homes and our village, never to return.””⁽¹⁶⁾

In December 2022, Hindu extremists attacked Christians in at least twenty villages in Chhattisgarh in order to force them to “re-convert” to Hinduism.⁽¹⁷⁾ Hindu nationalist label even the Adivasis as Hindus even though they are not. Like the anti-conversion laws in several other Indian states, Chhattisgarh’s law also prohibits “forcible” and “fraudulent” conversions.⁽¹⁸⁾ Under the definitions, even providing education or medical assistance to a Hindu can be construed as force or fraud. However, “conversion” under this law does not include returning to an “ancestor’s original religion or [the individual’s] own religion.”⁽¹⁹⁾ Due to this provision, Hinduism is effectively exempt from the law since Hindus consider it the only “original religion” in India. While Hindu nationalists falsely accuse Christians of forcibly converting others to Christianity, they commit violence to re-convert people and yet no action is taken against the attackers.

In the December 2022 attacks, at least 300 Adivasi Christian families (comprising of about 1,000 individuals) were reportedly ousted from their homes in Naryanpur and Kondegoan districts.⁽²⁰⁾ As is the case in such attacks, the police did not take any action against the attackers. The police registered a formal complaint of the attack only after about 1,000 people staged a protest.⁽²¹⁾

In November 2022, police in the state of Uttar Pradesh arrested nine pastors over false allegations of converting people.⁽²²⁾ The pastors were arrested at a wedding reception. A pastor had hosted a wedding reception for his daughter and son-in-law. But the police alleged that the Christians had gathered for a conversion program.⁽²³⁾

In July 2022, several pastors were attested in separate incidents over charges of forced conversion in Uttar Pradesh.⁽²⁴⁾ In one case, Pastor Santosh Kanoojiya, who was arrested with four other Christians but was later released on bail, had to shut down his house church due to the active legal case against him.

According to one report, over fifty pastors and Christians are languishing in prisons in Uttar Pradesh.⁽²⁵⁾ In just the last few months, over 200 churches have been shut down.⁽²⁶⁾

Due to the escalating persecution, Christian organizations filed a petition with the Supreme Court of India. According to a report in September 2022, the Court “ordered the chief secretaries of eight Indian states to compile information on the incidents and sent their reports to the federal interior ministry.”⁽²⁷⁾

4. Request

Approximately 1198 instances of Christian persecution in India were recorded in 2022, a 157% increase from 2021.⁽²⁸⁾ In at least 350 cases, Christians were arrested on false conversion charges. Other international organizations have also sounded an alarm that such persecution will only increase in 2023.⁽²⁹⁾ We request this Council to take note of the Indian Supreme Court’s directive and urge the Indian government to stop encouraging this violence, abolish the anti-conversion laws, and punish the perpetrators who violently attack innocent citizens and interfere with the right to freedom of religion.

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6. Brown, supra note 2.
7. See e.g., Neel Madhav & Alishan Jafri, Why India Is Witnessing Spike in Attacks on Christians, Churches, AL JAZEERA (Dec. 2, 2021).
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18. Chhattisgarh Dharma Swatantrya Adhiniyam [Freedom of Religion] Act, Act No. 27 of 1968, § 3 (19 Oct. 1968) (emphasis added).
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21. Id.
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26. Id.
27. Brown, supra note 2.
28. ANNUAL REPORT 2023, FIACONA, p.18.
29. Anugrah Kumar, Christian Persecution Likely to Intensify in Nigeria, India, China in 2023: Release International, THE CHRISTIAN POST, (Dec. 31, 2022).