

Archdiocese of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar

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PRESS STATEMENT

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Archbishop Cheenath's call for full reconciliation in Kandhamal through justice; deep concern at slow pace of reconstruction and rehabilitation; Cynical authorities diverting issues from restoring human dignity of the 2008 anti- Christian violence survivors.

[The following is the statement of His Grace Raphael Cheenath, SVD Archbishop of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar at a Press Conference today on the current situation in Kandhamal, Orissa and issues of rehabilitation and reconciliation and justice in the District. The press conference was also addressed by Dr John Dayal, Member, National Integration Council, and Secretary General, All India Christian Council.

Archbishop Raphael Cheenath, the senior Church leader of Orissa, said today that despite the claims of the state and district administrations, the human dignity, rights and life of the Christian victims of the 2008 violence remained far from normal. Fifteen months after they were uprooted, thousand still live in makeshift shanties along the road, and in the forests, with no seeming hope of rehabilitation, and harassed daily by Block and panchayat officials and the police. Hundreds of babies have been born in these conditions. "We want full reconciliation and lasting peace in Kandhamal which will be possible when justice is transparent, lives are rebuilt and people return to their own villages without fear. We do not want any ghettoisation in the district."

He faulted the attitude of the authorities on three major issues – the criminal justice dispensation system in the Fast Track courts which was being subverted by terrorising of witnesses and shoddy investigations, the utter inadequacy of government assistance in rebuilding houses, and the absence of genuine employment, livelihood and education schemes. It may be recalled the present District collector was very much on duty and present at the spot with the Deputy Inspector General and other top police officers when the violence started, and the mob attacked the Phulbani Church in the District headquarters.

The Church, which had received no assistance at all in rebuilding its own places of worship social development institutions, had extended great help, but the task was far too big for non government organisations. "It needs political will to implement special schemes by the government. We are willing to help to the best of our ability and resources," he assured the government. But, he said, he would have no hesitation in again approaching the Orissa High Court at Cuttack and the Supreme Court of India in New Delhi if the misery of the people was not ameliorated. They cannot be allowed to live through another summer and other monsoons without a shelter over their heads. The victims need sympathy but administration is raising all sorts of rules and regulations in the matter of relief and rehabilitation. Various human rights groups have warned of trafficking in young girls of the district.

Initially, 10 to 11,000 families were displaced from their homes by the violence. An estimated 1,200 families have migrated from the immediate area, many of them to Bhubaneswar or to other states in India. Over 6,000 refugees are living in the Saliasahi slums of Bhubaneswar, the State capital, and tens of thousands are working as labour in Andhra and other states, some as far away as Kerala and Punjab. 200-300 families continue to reside in private displacement camps in the district. At least 4,400 families continue to live in tents, makeshift shelters or the remnants of their damaged houses. The remainder of families have returned either to their villages or near their villages. The numbers who have received financial assistance from the government or the church or NGOs is not known for certain, but is believed to be 1,100.

The Dalit Christians remain the worst sufferers and have been denied employment, land and other entitlements. The state government's schemes announced by the Chief Minister must embrace all communities. This is so even in the employment of Special Police Offices, SPOs," he said. The District Collector has no hope to offer to the Dalits.

In the violence between 25th August and December 2008, as many as 5347 houses were looted and destroyed by fire, many women and girls were raped, and more than 75 people were murdered in the name of religion and ethnicity. Large-scale displacement and migrations followed with over 54,000 people becoming refugees in their own motherland. The administration arbitrarily fixed Rs 50,000 for fully destroyed houses, even though the reconstruction cost of even a simple house was from Rs 85,000 upwards. Similarly the administration arbitrarily designated fully destroyed houses as partial-damaged category with much lower relief. Most houses are indeed fully damaged and we want the administration to give full compensation.

The Church is helping towards minimum support of as many as 2,500 houses, but even after this, 3,000 families remain homeless. So far the Catholic Church has helped 181 fully damaged houses and 546 partly damaged

houses. Building materials have been distributed over to 752 families and the work in progress in Raikia and Nuagam Blocks only.

Even though we do not have exact statistics regarding the victims who have returned to their villages and settled down, a rough guess would be that, about one third of 54,000 Christians displaced due to violence, have returned to their villages, despite the claim of the administration. Some of them just do not want to go back for fear as they are being threatened to become Hindus if they want to come back home. Many affected households are yet to be enlisted in the government list for compensation depriving them all the support and rehabilitation. There is gross malpractice due to corrupt and indifference attitude of the local officials.

Justice is critical to long term peace. The two Fast Track Courts, and the Court premises, have seen a travesty of justice. Witnesses are being coerced, threatened, cajoled and sought to be bribed by murderers and arsonists facing trial. The court premises are full of top activists of fundamentalist organizations. The witnesses are also threatened in their homes with elimination, and even their distant relatives are being coerced specially in the murder and arson cases against Legislative Assembly Member Manoj Pradhan. Though some witnesses have deposed strongly on his involvement in the crimes, he has been let off in case after case.

We are demanding a Special Investigation team to investigate every case of murder and arson. Similarly, there is also need for transferring the cases against politically powerful persons such as Manoj Pradhan, MLA, to outside Kandhamal, preferably to Cuttack or Bhubaneswar.

We are deeply concerned the high rate of acquittals in the fast Track courts. The victims filed 3,232 Complaints in the police stations of Kandhamal. Of these, the police registered cases in only 832 instances. As many as 341 cases were in G Udaigiri alone, 98 in Tikabali and 90 in Raikia, followed by the others. Even out of this small number, only 123 cases were transferred to the two Fast Track Courts. So far 71 cases have been tried in the two courts, and 63 cases have been disposed off. Of these, conviction is only in 25 cases, and even that is partial as most of the accused have not been arrested or brought to trial. Only 89 persons have been convicted so far while as many as 251 have been acquitted and set free for want to witnesses against them. Among them is Manoj Pradhan. It is strange that in the case of ten deaths by murder, nine cases have been closed without anybody being convicted while there has been partial conviction in the case of one death. Who will bring justice in the case of the nine murder cases?

We demand that independent lawyers be associated with the Special Public Prosecutors who are overworked. The witnesses and the victims need full legal help so that the cases can be pursued with vigour and justice is available.

Compensation, Employment and Land issues: The compensation package declared by the State Government is very meagre, which is not sufficient for the house construction or any other purpose. This is a national calamity and demands a special package for the affected people which should include land, income generation, education and health care, etc., so that the poor innocent families who have lost everything can be rehabilitated properly. The government and the administration are giving all sorts of excuses to displace people from land they have lived on and farmed for generations. There should be proper settlement of land in the district, including lands to landless.

The Government should publish a "white paper" on the land issue.

Above all, the Government must maintain a position of neutrality and transparency. The block officers have been playing with the facts, indulging in corrupt practices and cosmetic exercises whenever political and other dignitaries come to visit or inspect. Innocent people are coerced into giving a false picture. The Chief Minister must investigate the role and functioning of the entire District administration, including the Collector, the block and tehsil officers and others connected with the operations. It is strange that officers in whose presence the violence took place and thousands of houses were burnt are still in office and are declaring that there is peace in the district.

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