

*This is a copy of a special letter sent out by Dr Emmanuel Rebba, President of IREF (India), concerning the current persecution of Christians in Orissa. [Orissa is the state bordering Andhra Pradesh to the north, Andhra Pradesh being the state where IREF(India) is based]*

## **Unprecedented violence against Christians in Orissa**

The fury of violence against innocent Christians in the villages of Kandhamal District of Orissa has been continuing unabated for the last month. Over 5,000 churches and several thousands of Christian houses in the villages, which are in remote areas near the forest, have been burnt to ashes. The villagers were brutally tortured. On a single day, 4,500 families fled to the forests, frightened for their lives.



Reports indicate that many either die of starvation or face death at the hands of the fundamentalist forces. So far, the death toll stands at 30. The brutalities have included the raping of nuns and the persecuting and killing of pastors. Christian leaders were specifically targeted. It was systematically pre-planned to destroy Christians and their villages. Some of the victims were sheltered in refugee camps, while several others fled to other states as refugees.



*Orissa ladies with their children*

Even the refugee camps were attacked. Water supplied to the camps was poisoned by the

persecutors. Some of the victims, including families with women holding infants and babies in their arms, have reached even Repalle. IREF has been sheltering them, and providing them with food and accommodation.

*Mrs Dee Rebba with the Orissa families*



The Christian population in Orissa is around 800,000. Many of the people are impoverished, both socially and financially. But with the help of various Christian Organisations, many are now progressing both educationally and spiritually. Now, religious bigots, filled with jealousy and hatred, have struck at them.

The conditions imposed by the fundamentalists are that those who have fled should convert to Hinduism, should not attend the church, and should do away with worship services and prayer, in order to return to their villages.

Here are testimonies from some victims of the persecution.

### **Sundeepta Kumar Naik**

My name is Sundeepta Kumar Naik. I am from the village of Kurmingia, Kandhamal District in Orissa. My ancestors used to live in the village. I am a teacher by profession. I was living in peace in our village. But one day, suddenly we heard a commotion around about us. I had seen a very big mob, running towards Christian houses. They were burning down all the houses of the Christians. They had also burnt down our church. They terrorized us. In the violent attacks made by the mob, some of us got injured. All of us started fleeing, leaving everything. The women ran away with the children in their arms. For days, we ran like that and reached a railway station. We boarded the first train, not knowing where we were going. We reached Repalle. We went to IREF, where they received us



warmly and sheltered us. We were given food and living accommodation. We praise the Lord for His mercy shown upon us and thank IREF for helping us. We have been here at Repalle for the last 15 days.

### Rev. Dhanurya Pradhan

My name is Rev. Dhanurya Pradhan. I have been pastoring the congregation in the village of Kurmingia, Kandhamal District, in Orissa state. As a pastor, I was preaching and praying for the people. I used to conduct Sunday worship services regularly in our small village church. One day, a very large crowd armed with crowbars, axes and sickles suddenly came to our village and attacked the Christian population. They burnt down the church. Later they started destroying or burning the houses. They threatened us with dire consequences and all of us ran away from our village for the safety of our lives. We fled to a forest. Later, as we did not have any food, we reached a railway station, walking several miles, taking a winding and long route. Afterwards we reached Repalle, where IREF received us and sheltered us giving us food and other needs. We thank IREF for the timely help given. We pray to the Lord to protect us from the wicked.



### Rev. Ananta Charan Bhatra

My name is Rev. Ananta Charan Bhatra. I have been pastoring the congregation of the Barakhama village. Though our village-people were backward, they embraced Christianity with great zeal and spirituality. All of them attend the church and prayer meetings. Now there is a transformation of the people in our village. Many of them have become literate. Their children are getting educated in schools and colleges. By the grace of our Lord, the Christian society is progressing well. But all of a sudden, the fundamentalist forces attacked our village, burning the church and the houses. We fled from the village and reached Repalle. We now understand from reports that it was plotted to destroy each and every village of the Christians. By the mercy of Lord Jesus, we were received in Repalle by IREF with love and affection. IREF sheltered us and made boarding and lodging arrangements for all of us. We thank Dr. Emmanuel Rebba for all the help rendered to us. Please pray for all the affected in this persecution.

*Dr Emmanuel Rebba with two Orissa Pastors*

Please pray for the affected Christian populace of Orissa. Pray for their pastors and church leaders.



There is a great need for helping the victims to provide food, provisions, utensils, clothes and health care; to help them rebuild their churches and homes destroyed. We are unceasingly praying for all the affected families

### Emmanuel Rebba.

## Nun was gang raped and priest brutally assaulted in Kandhamal

FIRs filed but no arrests by State government; no response from Centre; Sister Nirmala wrote to CM and PM appealing for protection to Christians

**Parvathi Menon**

**BHUBANESWAR:** The Orissa government has failed to take any action, under the law of the land, against those who committed heinous crimes — the gang rape of a 28-year-old Catholic nun and the brutal attack on a Catholic priest who courageously resisted their attempts to force him to participate in the atrocity. These incidents took place on August 25 at K. Nuagaon, 12 km from the Baliguda subdivision in Kandhamal district. Both victims filed First Information Reports at the Baliguda police station. Sister Nirmala, Superior-General of the Missionaries of Charity, wrote to the Orissa Chief Minister and the Prime Minister specifying the atrocities.

The brutalisation of the nun and the priest by a mob raising anti-Christian, Hinduva slogans took place around 1 p.m. at the site of the Deepa Jyoti Pastor Centre. The church was burnt the previous day in reprisal against the murder of an RSS activist, Lakshmanamunda Saraswathi, and four of his associates on August 23. The gang rape of the young nun, whose 'virginity (was) grossly violated in public' (and whose identity is being withheld by this newspaper to protect her privacy) took place in front of a police outpost with 12 policemen from the Orissa State Armed Police present and watching, according to Father Thomas Chellan, the priest who was dragged out and badly beaten.

"Around 1 p.m., a gang came and pulled me and the Sister out of the house where we had taken shelter and started assaulting us," Father Chellan told *The Hindu* in a telephonic interview from Kerala where he is recuperating.

"My appeals to the policemen who were standing near by and watching only resulted in further beating. At one point the nun slipped away to plead with the police for help but she was dragged back by the mob and her blouse torn," he said. The nun was gang raped in a nearby building, and he was doused with kerosene by the mob, which threatened to set him on fire. They were saved by a group of youth who took them to the police outpost where "one among the attackers was present with the police between 3 p.m. and 9 p.m.," Father Chellan said.

News of the K-Nuagaon atrocity was conveyed through mobile phones to several priests and nuns hiding in the forests, fearing for their lives as the anti-Christian hunt was on. The victims were taken to the Baliguda police station around 9 p.m. where they filed First Information Reports. "I believe the Sister wrote in her complaint that she was raped," Father Chellan said.

The atrocity, about which the State government has not gone public, has outraged and terrified Christian organisations working in Kandhamal district. News of it was brought to the notice of Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik by Raphael Cheenath, Archbishop of the Cuttack-Bhubaneswar diocese.

Sister Nirmala wrote letters to the Orissa Chief Minister and the Prime Minister on this and other brutal attacks on Christians in Orissa. In her letter, dated August 28, 2008, to Chief Minister Patnaik, she took up "a very sad incident, soon after the eruption of the violence" of "one young sister, consecrated to God, who was administrator of an institute, being hunted out of her hiding place and stripped naked by the mob and her virginity grossly violated in public, without any help from the police present there."

In her appeal for protection to Christians, Sister Nirmala urged the Central Govt. for "as many crises fanned from the Centre as they are willing to give and you need."

When contacted, Praveen Kumar, Superintendent of Police, Kandhamal district, told *The Hindu* that investigations into the episode by a Deputy Superintendent of Police were on and "the law will take its course." He confirmed that no arrests have been made in connection with the incidents.

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**TERRIFYING VIOLENCE:** A vandalised church in Tengedapathar village in Kandhamal district. A mob shouting anti-Christian and Hinduva slogans attacked this church three days after the gang rape of a nun and attack on a priest in K.Nuagaon. — PHOTO: AFP

*Thank you for your on-going prayerful support for IREF and for the care it is showing to the victims of persecution at this time.*

**David Hunt** [Chairman, IREF(UK)]