

November 7, 2008

The Honorable George W. Bush
President
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President:

For more than two months, Christians in seven of India's states have borne the brunt of repeated waves of violent and deadly attacks that have left scores of people murdered, communities and churches destroyed, and tens of thousands of people homeless. The situation demands a strong and urgent American response to a strategic democratic global partner such as India.

As has been well documented, the violence erupted following the tragic attack on a charismatic Hindu leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati and four others, which led to their deaths on August 23. Although a radical Maoist group claimed responsibility for the killings, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) blamed the deaths on the Indian Christian community. Using the instability created by the violence, Hindu extremist groups fostered civil unrest, initially attacking poor Christians in India's eastern state of Orissa as well as Christian agencies who serve the poor and the needy from diverse religious backgrounds in that state.

For some time, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and its allies regularly have alleged that Christians use force and material benefits to lure Hindus into "forced conversions," charges for which no proof has been produced and that local Christian leaders steadfastly deny.

Indian Christian leaders from various denominations have expressed in writing their deep shock at the magnitude of the human rights violations launched by Hindu extremists against the mostly poor Christians in the state of Orissa. They also have criticized the government for its subsequent handling of the incident as well as for not providing civil protection to these Indian citizens.

During a weekly audience at the Vatican, Pope Benedict has called the killing of the Hindu leader "deplorable" and also expressed his sadness at violence against Christians.

The failure of the Indian government at the federal and state levels to act has led to the spread of the violence from Orissa into six other states — Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Tamil Nadu and Uttarakhand.

To date, Christians in these states have become the targets of the extremist's hatred. More than 60 people have been killed; some 50,000 people have been left homeless; and some still remain in hiding. Churches and Christian-run institutions serving mostly poor communities have been utterly destroyed. Other minorities have also been attacked.

Modern India's founding father, Mohandas Gandhi, said, "My notion of democracy is that under it the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest. This can never happen except through non-violence."

What has happened recently in India, and has been happening over the past few years, is tantamount to "religious cleansing" of Christians and other minorities by extremists. This in the world's largest democracy that is a nuclear power and recently sent a mission to the moon.

Earlier this summer you affixed your signature to legislation that enacted a US-India nuclear trade agreement with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. At the time you stated, “This agreement sends a signal to the world — nations that follow the path to democracy and responsible behavior will find a friend in the United States.”

We urge you, therefore, to hold the Indian government accountable to its own constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion and religious expression for all its citizens. As the world’s largest democracy, India must demonstrate its responsibility and ability to uphold that constitution. We ask that you express to Prime Minister Singh the U.S. government’s abhorrence of the continued violence against Christians and other minorities within India’s borders. You should insist, in the strongest terms, that these reprehensible groups and the assenting local government agencies be brought into conformity with India’s rule of law. Only if India agrees and acts with goodwill toward all its citizens will it continue to be viewed as a responsible global partner worthy of a place on the world stage with other democratic nations.

Respectfully,

Signatories

Archbishop Vicken Aykazian
Archbishop
Armenian Orthodox Church

Bishop James Leggett
Presiding Bishop
International Pentecostal Holiness Church

Dr. Ken Bensen
CEO
Habitat for Humanity of Michigan

Rev. Michael E. Livingston
Executive Director
International Council of Community
Churches, and Immediate Past President,
National Council of Churches, USA

Jeff Farmer
President
Open Bible Churches

Jo Anne Lyon
General Superintendent
The Wesleyan Church

Wes Granberg-Michaelson
General Secretary
Reformed Church in America

Dr. Carl A. Moeller
President/CEO
Open Doors USA

John Graz
General Secretary
Secretary General of the International
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David Neff
Editor in Chief
Christianity Today magazine

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Archbishop Cyril Aphrem Karim
Archbishop
Archdioceses of the Syrian Orthodox Church
of Antioch for the Eastern USA

Bishop Serapion
Bishop of Los Angeles
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Dr. William Shaw
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Rev. John H. Thomas
General Minister and President
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Bishop Matthew A. Thomas
Bishop
Free Methodist Church of North America

Dr. Daniel Vestal
President
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

Berten A. Waggoner
National Director
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Bishop Thomas G. Wenski
Chairman, Committee on International
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United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Dr. Tom White
Executive Director
The Voice of the Martyrs