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INDIA CSW encourages government to be vigilant against communal violence after inflammatory speech

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is concerned by recent inflammatory statements in India about the sensitive issue of religious conversion, noting that such statements have previously led to worsening attitudes and increasing violence against religious minority communities.

During the Akhil Bhartiya Dharmaprasar Karyakarta Sammelan event in Gujarat this week, Praveen Togadia, General Secretary of the extremist group Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), called for India's Constitution to allow for "anyone who converts Hindus to be beheaded", and made a series of inflammatory statements against India's Muslim community. His remarks were widely reported.

Previously, Swami Agnivesh, a widely respected social activist of the Hindu revivalist group Arya Samaj, wrote a letter to Pope Benedict XVI calling for a moratorium on the conversion of "unlettered tribals" and others. His letter was a response to the Pope's Diwali message, which urged Christians and Hindus to work together for religious freedom, including "the freedom to change one's own religion".

In July, an article by Janata Party President Subramanian Swamy sparked countrywide controversy for its comments about Muslims. It also recommended a "national law prohibiting conversion from Hinduism to any other religion".

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "India's pluralist pedigree is once again under concerted fire. Inflammatory remarks such as Togadia's can be a spur for prejudice and violence against Muslims and Christians: for example, communal attacks against Christians in India are often linked to unsubstantiated accusations about conversions. Any activities which lead to religious conversions should of course be carried out with the utmost respect and sensitivity. But international jurisprudence on this issue is very clear: the right to have or to adopt a religion includes the freedom to change religion, and the right to manifest a religion includes the right to share religious beliefs with others. The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief reiterated these points after her 2008 visit to India, and we encourage the Government of India to be vigilant against any rise in communal violence that may be ignited by these statements. We welcomed Home Minister P Chidambaram's letter to chief ministers in October urging them to guard against communal violence, and we continue to applaud the Government's ongoing commitment to pass an effective law to prevent, control and deal with the aftermath of communal violence, and encourage them to make this as effective as possible."