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## INDIA | 5,000 victims in Kandhamal district, Orissa, gather to demand justice

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Around 5,000 victims and survivors of the 2008 communal violence in Kandhamal district, Orissa, attended a public rally yesterday to mark the fourth anniversary of the violence and call for justice, peace and harmony. Local authorities only granted permission on the evening before the rally, and organizers claimed they had deliberately obstructed it for as long as possible.

Bishop Sarat Nayak, Catholic Bishop of Berhampur, addressed the rally, saying, "Peace can come only when there is truth and justice". The Christians, some of whom covered their mouths with black ribbons, displayed banners with slogans including, "We want justice, justice, justice", "Stop politics in the name of religion", and "We demand brotherhood in Kandhamal".

The rally also included a song written by Sharada Charan, a survivor of the violence, which captured some of the collective sentiment of the victims. The lyrics are translated as, "We are the people of Kandhamal / We are searching for our lost friends / We lived blinded by unfaith / We forgot love and affection in the shadow of discrimination / There are only sorrowful tears / Smiles of happiness have faded / the sons of the land are leaving / They are thrown away on the road of progress / So let's forget the past and move forward / Singing songs of love".

Fr Ajay Singh, an Orissa-based human rights activist involved in facilitating the Kandhamal rally, said, "This rally was to pay homage to the dead, and to call for justice, security and livelihood for the victims. It was to draw the attention of the government and other stakeholders to these needs, and to encourage the victims and build up solidarity among them. Despite the government giving permission only at the very last moment, the people came from far-flung, remote areas serviced with little public transport, braving the rain and possible threats and intimidation from the Sangh Parivar [extremist Hindu nationalist organizations] and government officials. That indicates their thirst for justice, which you could see written on their faces, and when they left, they had a feeling that justice would be done sooner or later. We need to see progress towards that."

Also on August 30, the Himachal Pradesh High Court delivered a judgment in a case challenging the anti-conversion law in the state, striking down two provisions but holding the other aspects of the law to be constitutional. The court ruled against section 4 of the law, which makes it mandatory for a person seeking to convert to give prior notice to the district administration (except in the case of those re-converting to their earlier religion, which typically refers to a conversion to Hinduism), and rules 3 and 5, which mandate the state to inquire into every conversion. The Evangelical Fellowship of India, a principal petitioner in the case, welcomed the striking down of two clauses but said it was "regrettable" that the rest of the law was upheld, and noted that this "inadvertently played into the hands of communal forces".

David Griffiths, South Asia Team Leader for CSW, said, "As Bishop Sarat noted at the Kandhamal rally, justice is a prerequisite for peace. It is important to remember that the 2008 violence in Orissa came only eight months after an earlier wave of violence, for which there was mass impunity. With extremists still perpetuating communal tensions and the victims remaining deeply disenfranchised, the only way to guard against further violence and to promote true peace is to secure justice. That is why the cry of the victims must be heard. In Himachal Pradesh, the ruling striking down two aspects of the anti-conversion law was welcome, but it is disappointing that the other provisions of the law were upheld. The very concept of anti-conversion laws has been strongly criticized both by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and during India's

recent Universal Periodic Review at the UN, and we fully concur with the view that these laws are in violation of India's obligations under international law".