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INDIA | Impact of Kandhamal Violence Still Felt Years Later

The Christian community in Kandhamal district, Odisha state (formerly Orissa), will mark the fifth anniversary this weekend of a wave of violence in which an estimated 90 people were killed and at least 54,000 displaced. Much of the violence was brutal in nature, including sexual violence and burning or burying victims alive.

The long-term impact of the 2008 violence, which was the culmination of decades of anti-Christian hate speech and smaller-scale attacks in the area, continues to be felt. Against the backdrop of a rising number of acquittals of perpetrators of the 2008 violence, the Christian community still faces harassment and violence. Reportedly, 29 girls from their community were sexually assaulted in the last year alone.

Thousands of victim-survivors still fear returning to their villages owing to the threats they continue to receive. At least 5,000 have relocated to Salia Sahi, the largest slum in state capital Bhubaneswar. Some have migrated to other states, including Kerala. Many in these displaced communities have paid a significant economic penalty for their relocation.

Paul Pradhan, director of Pallishree Seva Sadan, a social welfare center in Paburia which was destroyed in the violence and has not been rebuilt, said, "Our people have lost everything. They have lost their houses, their tools, everything. Many people have left and have still not come back to their villages. In most areas, peace has still not been restored. Until adequate compensation is given, the people cannot recover. The government is not giving enough compensation. There should be a re-survey of damages. Even my own case is very miserable. I am not able to recuperate, while perpetrators are thriving. My own place is still destroyed. I am also not well, my health is not well".

Many of the victims are still awaiting justice and adequate compensation for their losses. Although the conviction rate of around 30 percent is significantly higher than the national average, many of those convicted are now on bail, even for the most serious offences, and the majority of complaints were never subject to a police investigation. Many witnesses in the cases that have been

investigated have been threatened against giving evidence in court, and without sufficient protection, a large number have lost faith in the justice system.

Some human rights activists report facing harassment not only from Hindu extremist groups but also occasionally from the police, who accuse them of being Maoist supporters.

Fr Ajay Singh, a prominent Odisha-based human rights activist, faced renewed threats after being awarded the Minority Rights Award by the National Commission for Minorities in July. He said, "Insecurity and fear still prevail among the Christian community here due to the rise in the number of acquittals of criminals. Justice delivery systems have failed and are costly. The people cannot afford it. The Church and the civil society groups are not able to make the government accountable to the people. Neither do the duty-bearers feel obliged to the community. Besides the insecurity and fear, frustration is also rampant. Ninety percent of victims are struggling for their own livelihood. This is a multi-pronged problem. The challenge before us is to make the duty bearers accountable. How do we make the criminal justice system function? Who will do it? There is no other way but to make people aware. The right holders should be encouraged to stand up for their rights. The history of the Kandhamal situation shows us that every time we spoke about peace without fighting for justice, violence continued to take place."

David Griffiths, South Asia Team Leader at Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "CSW remains deeply concerned by the poor delivery of justice, inadequate rehabilitation for victims, and the lack of genuine peace in the area. We are also concerned by reports of continuing incidents of violence, and by allegations of harassment by human rights defenders working on behalf of victims. Much more needs to be done locally before it can be said this violence has been resolved. Communal violence of this nature has a long genesis and a long-term impact, and often follows a predictable pattern. In recognition of this significant anniversary, we again urge the Government of India to introduce the Prevention of Communal and Targeted Violence Bill, which will provide a much more effective framework for dealing with violence of this sort in future."