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INDIA | CSW Deplores Crackdown on Peaceful Protest

CSW deplores the heavy-handed manner in which police broke up a peaceful demonstration by thousands of people in New Delhi who were calling for an end to the statutory discrimination against Dalit Christians and Muslims on the basis of religion. Police used lathis (canes) and water cannon to break up the march towards Parliament, and arrested the leaders. Several people, including nuns and priests, were injured.

The march began at Jantar Mantar and headed toward Sansad Bhavan (Parliament House), in defiance of a ban on protests along Sansad Marg (Parliament Street). Protesters in Delhi often court arrest by approaching the restricted area, but the police response this time was uncommonly heavy-handed.

Catholic Archbishop Anil Couto of Delhi was among those arrested and taken to a police station, before being released without charge. He said in a statement, "Government after government have been turning a deaf ear to the demand of Christians. Now they are going to the extent of brutally beating up our priests and nuns and now arresting us too." Protest leaders have filed a case against police for their manhandling of women protesters.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh apologized in person to some of the protest leaders for the heavy-handed police response and promised their demands would be discussed at the next Cabinet meeting.

The march was held to call for a change to the law excluding Dalit Christians and Muslims from a range of special measures granted to Dalits of Hindu, Buddhist or Sikh background, who are classified as Scheduled Castes. These measures include "reservations", a quota system applicable in public sector education and employment, and legislation dealing with caste-based crimes against Dalits. This issue is being challenged in a Supreme Court case, which has been delayed since 2005 by the failure of the government to state its position. Several government commissions, as well as UN human rights mechanisms, have issued clear recommendations that the discriminatory legislation must be changed.

Dr. John Dayal, a senior civil rights activist and member of the government's National Integration Council, was among those briefly arrested. He said, "We are outraged at the police violence against peaceful Christians agitating for the restoration of their constitutional rights. This strengthens our resolve to continue the struggle."

Fr. Ajay Singh, a Catholic priest and human rights activist from Orissa who was also present, said, "The Prime Minister's apology must be followed by action to end more than 60 years of

injustice done to Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims, which is totally against the spirit of equality and secularism. He should not play politics with the millions of Indians deprived of their human rights. The police response to the protest shows how the state ignores the multiple layers of discrimination against the most vulnerable and marginalized minority communities.”

Mervyn Thomas, CSW’s Chief Executive, said, “It is deplorable that in India, a peaceful protest on such an important issue is treated in this way. India is increasingly at risk of gaining an unseemly reputation for its restriction and mistreatment of human rights defenders, which is profoundly inconsistent with its proud democratic tradition. We urge the Indian government to rise above this, and allow civil society to flourish. As for the subject of the protest, the mandate to address this historic discrimination is very clear, and the government should take action as soon as possible.”