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## INDIA | CSW Briefing Outlines Religious Freedom Concerns

As India approaches its general election, expected to take place in May, CSW released a new briefing setting out an agenda of religious freedom concerns which the government should address.

CSW's briefing, *India: Communalism in an Election Year*, outlines situations of ongoing concern in Odisha (formerly Orissa), Karnataka, and Rajasthan states. It describes the typically long genesis of communal violence and the pattern of impunity afterwards, and argues the need for vigilance to avert possible future outbreaks of violence, especially in areas where Hindu extremist groups have been stoking tensions among adivasi (tribal) communities. It also highlights the statutory discrimination against Christian and Muslim Dalits, anti-conversion legislation, and censorship under blasphemy laws.

In addition, CSW's briefing expresses concern about increasing pressure on human rights defenders, including harassment from the intelligence bureau and threats from Hindu extremist organizations. CSW describes human rights defenders as an essential bulwark against the worst violations, and argues that "protecting and strengthening advocacy for human rights within India is a compelling imperative".

The briefing comes in the wake of a privately-arranged visit of Heiner Bielefeldt, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, to the cities of Delhi, Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, and Bhubaneswar. Bielefeldt met a wide range of human rights defenders of different backgrounds, victim-survivors of communal violence, and the National Human Rights Commission.

Concerns around freedom of religion or belief in India have received greater international attention in recent months, following the outbreak of violence against Muslims in Muzaffarnagar last September, and the nomination of Narendra Modi as the prime ministerial candidate for the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Modi is stoutly unapologetic for the communal violence which engulfed Gujarat during the early months of his tenure as chief minister in 2002, in which 2,000 people died, mostly Muslims.

CSW's Chief Executive, Mervyn Thomas, said, "In this general election year, there are heightened fears about minority communities being targeted for violence or discrimination. We are particularly concerned about the prevailing impunity after cases of communal violence, whether large-scale as in Odisha's Kandhamal district, or the frequent, smaller-scale attacks in Karnataka and other states, and we continue to encourage the government to establish a legislative framework to deal adequately with such violence. Our briefing also highlights a range of long-term, structural issues, which the current government and any future government must

seek to address in order to safeguard the rights of all Indian citizens. We welcome some steps in the right direction, but there is much more that needs to be done.”