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INDIA | Kandhamal Violence Victims Continue to Seek Justice

Ahead of the 8th anniversary of India's worst incidence of anti-Christian violence in Kandhamal, Odisha State, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) stands in solidarity with victim-survivors in their ongoing pursuit of justice.

On Aug. 25 2008, communal violence targeted at the Christian community in Kandhamal District, Odisha State, by Hindu fundamentalists led to the deaths of at least 90 people, according to local monitoring groups. Government figures put the death toll at 38. An estimated 5,600 houses were looted and burned while an estimated 300 churches and other places of worship were destroyed. During this time, approximately 2,000 people were forced by Hindu fundamentalists to renounce their Christian faith and more than 10,000 children had their education severely disrupted.

"The recent death of Archbishop Emeritus Raphael Cheenath on Aug. 14 coincides poignantly with the days when we recall the martyrdom of perhaps the largest single group of Christians in India in many centuries," Dr. John Dayal, the former National President of the All India Catholic Union, said. "The orchestrated pogrom, a targeted violence on Dalits and tribal communities in the Kandhamal forest district of Odisha in 2008 speaks of the penetration of militant Hindu fundamentalists into the deepest hinterland, where they seek to challenge freedom of faith of the common people - in the process exploiting State impunity and the possible complicity of police and other government apparatus. The late Archbishop has been partly vindicated, but the struggle he led in his lifetime continues, for many more crimes need investigation. The search for justice continues."

Many of the victim-survivors of the Kandhamal violence have yet to receive justice. On Aug. 2, in a welcome development, the Supreme Court of India directed the Odisha State Government to re-investigate 315 cases of communal violence from 2008; all instances in which reports were made to the police but were not followed through or did not result in prosecution of the offenders.

The violence in Kandhamal had a long genesis. Christians in the district had been subject to hate campaigns by Hindu fundamentalists since the 1960s, when attacks on places of worship

and Christian leaders were a regular occurrence. The communal violence in 2008 was sparked by the killing of prominent Hindu Swami Laxmanananda on Aug. 23, 2008. Despite the media citing police sources to point to Maoist involvement his death, Hindu fundamentalists blamed and later targeted the Christian community.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW will continue to stand in solidarity with the victim-survivors of the Kandhamal violence as they seek justice. The Supreme Court's decision to reopen 315 cases is an acknowledgement that the institutional and societal conditions that allowed the violence to happen must be addressed, and we urge the State and Federal government to ensure that the perpetrators of this crime are apprehended and held to account. What happened in Kandhamal must not be forgotten; we will persist in calling for these crimes and the legacy of injustice to be addressed."