



4.11.17

INDIA | Christians Face Intolerance on Palm Sunday

Christians in six states in India witnessed harassment and attacks as they gathered to celebrate Palm Sunday on April 9.

In the village of Sitabedi in Madhya Pradesh State, Pastor Amar Singh Solanki of the Indian Evangelical Team was arrested at the instigation of Hindu fundamentalists along with Pastor Kishore Barela and Pastor Prabhakar Solanki, while they were conducting worship. They were accused of conducting conversions by force and allurement. A First Information Report (FIR) was registered against them under the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act. The pastors are imprisoned and awaiting bail.

In Dindigul District, Tamil Nadu State, a 24-hour prayer meeting attended by about 25 people was disrupted by the Revenue Inspector (RI) and Village Administrative Officer (VAO). Although according to a 2012 Madras High Court ruling, no prior permission is required for conducting home prayer meetings, the RI and VAO insisted that permission was needed for conducting prayers at home. The Christians who were gathered there were informed they would not be allowed to continue their prayers until permission from the District Collector was granted. Pastor Gunasekharan, who led the prayer meeting, was forced to promise that he will not hold future prayer meetings and to sign a letter to that effect.

Meanwhile in Chhattisgarh State, three churches located on the outskirts of the state capital Raipur, were terrorized by Hindu fundamentalists groups. According to reports, groups of about 20 fundamentalists on motorcycles entered the premises of the churches during morning worship service and began to cause a disturbance, threatening the worshipers by shouting phrases such as, "Christians go to Israel" and "in India you have to bow to our religion or get beheaded."

Additionally, in Ghazipur District, Uttar Pradesh, a Hindu fundamentalist physically assaulted Pastor Krishna Paul of the Believer's Church. Disruptions to church worship services were also reported in Sri Ganganagar, Rajasthan, where Pastor Saji Matthew of the Church of God and Pastor Yashpal in Kaithal, Haryana were accused of alleged conversion.

Pastor Krishna Paul, Pastor Saji Matthew and Pastor Yashpal were all arrested but later released after interventions were made by local Christian leaders and the Evangelical Fellowship of India.

These events follow an incident on April 7 in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh State, where members of the Hindu Yuva Vahini (Hindu youth army), which is led by the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, attacked a church during their prayer meeting, which was also attended by U.S. nationals. The District Magistrate of Gorakhpur said the church was vandalized because it did not have permission for prayers.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "It is worrying to hear that Christians in the world's most populous democracy are facing aggression from Hindu fundamentalist groups and law enforcement agencies, given that freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion is guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. We urge the Indian government to take firm action against fundamentalist groups and law enforcement officials that intimidate and attack religious minorities."