

Orissa Victims Outside Kandhamal District Struggle for Justice

All India Christian Council signs agreement with Human Rights Law Network to assist victims of 2008 anti-Christian riots in Gajapati District

Free legal services will help hundreds of families gain income, independence, and improved lives

HYDERABAD – June 19, 2009

The All India Christian Council (aicc) signed an agreement with the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN) to provide free legal intervention for victims of anti-Christian violence and to usher long-term solutions for inter-faith harmony in Gajapati District in India's eastern state of Orissa. Kandhamal District was the epicenter for riots from August to October 2008. But Gajapati District had the second largest number of crimes. At least 337 families lost homes or businesses. Most rehabilitation as well as public attention has focused on Kandhamal District.

Dr. Sam Paul, aicc National Secretary of Public Affairs, said, "We are pleased to help where help is very much needed. HRLN lawyers and social workers have assisted victims in Gajapati District since the unprecedented anti-Christian riots in 2008. We're privileged to strengthen and enhance their ongoing efforts by providing needed resources and using our network of Christian leaders in the area." Most victims are from Scheduled Castes (Dalits) or Scheduled Tribes and extremely poor.

Both organisations anticipate the investment in the District will result in more than just favorable court verdicts. "This partnership is unique because our goal is legal intervention that will result in more than just convictions for the perpetrators of crimes. We will help victims replace lost identity documents like ration cards and voter's ID cards, apply for government assistance including employment through the Nation Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, and much more. Our efforts will result in income, independence, and, eventually, improved lives for people in these communities," said Sam Paul.

The agreement between aicc and HRLN provides needed equipment and covers fees for legal experts, including lawyers, social workers, and other personnel. The team will offer free legal services including filing of police cases, legal training for lawyers, awareness workshops, publications, and civil society campaigns.

Sam Paul visited the District from June 10-14, 2009, and verified a recent survey by the Gajapati United Christian Forum (an associate organisation of aicc) which documented: 320 houses damaged, one death, five people injured, 20 churches demolished, and 19 businesses destroyed. These anti-Christian attacks occurred in 22 villages located in three blocks of Gajapati District in August 2008. A separate HRLN survey found over 700 families were affected and 2-3 years of legal intervention is needed. According to media reports, initially thousands were displaced and about 800 lived in two government relief camps for several months. While victims have now returned to their villages, the vast majority have not received any compensation promised by the state government.

Sam Paul was accompanied by the aicc National Legal Secretary, Ms. Lansinglu Rongmei, and the leadership team of HRLN Gajapati District Unit. Ms. Lansinglu was appointed to her aicc position on Oct. 27, 2008. She is a New Delhi-based advocate who practices at the Supreme Court level and works part-time on aicc cases across India.

Anti-Christian violence spread throughout 14 (of 30) districts in Orissa after Lakshmanananda Saraswati, a Hindu swami and rightwing leader, was killed on Aug. 23, 2008. Maoist militants claimed responsibility but extremist Hindus blamed Christians. During violence which lasted until mid-October, the aicc recorded: 315 villages damaged, 4,640 Christian houses burnt, 54,000 Christians homeless, 70 people killed (including least 6 pastors and one Roman Catholic priest killed) and another 50 missing and presumed dead, 10 priests/pastors/nuns seriously injured, estimated 18,000 Christians injured, at least two women (including a nun) raped, an estimated 300 churches and “prayer halls” destroyed (252 according to the state government), and 13 Christian schools and colleges damaged. See dedicated webpage at: <http://indianchristians.in/news/content/view/2332/45/> Most of the violence was in Kandhamal District where over 2,500 cases have been filed by a legal team headed by Roman Catholic staff.

From Dec. 24, 2007-Jan. 2, 2008, attacks in Kandhamal District killed at least four Christians and destroyed over 100 churches and 730 Christian homes. Most of the victims were Dalits, formerly known as untouchables.

The All India Christian Council (www.christiancouncil.in), birthed in 1998, exists to protect and serve the Christian community, minorities, and the oppressed castes. The aicc is a coalition of thousands of Indian denominations, organizations, and lay leaders.

The Human Rights Law Network (www.hrln.org), begun in 1989, is a collective of lawyers and social activists dedicated to the use of legal system to advance human rights. HRLN collaborates with social movements, human rights organizations, and grass-roots development groups and provides pro bono legal services, conducts public interest litigation, engages in advocacy, conducts legal awareness programmes, investigates violations, publishes 'know your rights' materials, and participates in campaigns.

Released by

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