

**Statement on Religious Violence and Intolerance in India**

*“Open your mouth for the mute,  
For the rights of all the unfortunate.  
Open your mouth, judge righteously,  
And defend the rights of the afflicted and needy”.*  
(Proverbs 31:8-9)

1. Religious tolerance has been the basic tenet and hallmark of India's ancient civilisation and history. For centuries, people practising various religious faiths have lived side by side in peace. India's rich tradition of religious plurality has been a symbol of social and religious harmony. However, that situation has been changing in recent years as religious intolerance has emerged as a dominant factor in conflicts. Religious violence has increased in recent years in several parts of India. The organised violence, inhuman acts and atrocities against religious minorities were carried out with full impunity under the eyes of law enforcement authorities. The growing environment of religious intolerance and violence has already claimed many lives in India.
2. The new wave of attacks against Christians was triggered by the killing of a Hindu leader, Swami Laxanananda Saraswati, along with five other people at Tumudibandh, Kandhamal District, in Orissa on 23 August 2008. The rebellious Maoist Naxalite groups prominent in this region have admitted responsibility for the murder of Swami and his followers. In addition, the state police authorities have stated that the killing was carried out by the Maoists. However, leaders of certain fundamentalist Hindu organisations blamed Christians for these killings. Despite the condemnation expressed by Christian groups and churches at the killing of the Swami and his associates and their demand for the culprits to be caught and punished, in retaliation, the extremist Hindu organisations have engaged in a series of attacks against Christians throughout the State of Orissa. The minority Christians in Orissa have been experiencing various forms of atrocities in recent weeks including looting, destruction of churches and church-run institutions, brutal attacks against priests, nuns, church workers and other members of the Christian community, most of whom are Dalits and Adivasis (tribals). Reports from various sources confirmed that at least fifty thousand Christians in Orissa have been displaced; hundreds of Christians have fled their homes and taken refuge in forests; many others are living in 18 relief camps, and find themselves threatened in the camps as well. The plight of the victims and survivors of this communal carnage, the fear and trauma they are experiencing, the poor and unhygienic facilities in the government-run relief camps, the inefficiency of government machinery in tackling the violence, continue to be a serious concern. The upsurge of religious extremism in Orissa in recent weeks has left many Christians in Orissa virtually defenceless.
3. This new wave of organised violence against Christians, which started in Orissa, has now spread to other States such as Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala. Attacks orchestrated by Hindu extremist groups against the Christians are considered as an organised plot and just one link in a long chain of events that have continued to strain communal harmony and inter-religious relations in the country. Although the attacks against Christians are interpreted as religious violence, in most circumstances the under current is based on socio-economic factors. Christians in the country have been repeatedly accused of encouraging conversion to Christianity. Various Churches have been unequivocal in their official documents and statements and go on *ad nauseam* that conversion to Christianity by force or fraudulent means is strictly prohibited.
4. The violence and threats against the Christians of India is an assault on the Constitution of India. The Indian Constitution declares India to be a “sovereign socialist secular democratic republic” which secures to all citizens “justice; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; and equality of status and opportunity”. Under articles 14, 15 and 16 of the Indian Constitution, discrimination based on religion is prohibited. Article 25 guarantees the right to freely practice and propagate religion. In addition to these constitutional guarantees at the domestic level, India is also party to several international treaties that stipulate human rights obligations. Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights establishes the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Article 26 bars discrimination on the grounds of religion while Article 27 stipulates that in “those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion...”. However, the rights and freedoms of the people are not

merely guaranteed but also protected by various States in India. India now has seven states, which have legislation banning religious conversions. The seven Indian states with anti-conversion legislation (known as the Freedom of Religion Acts), include Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Arunachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. Hindu extremists commonly use anti-conversion legislation to falsely accuse Christians of converting people through force or allurement; thus justifying subsequent attacks on Christians. They also deflect prosecution away from themselves by pressing charges of “forcible conversion” without any evidence.

5. The Churches and Christian leaders in India have been making considerable efforts for appealing to people to strive for peace and reconciliation. The call given by the United Christian Forum comprised of the National Council of Churches in India, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India and the Evangelical Fellowship of India to observe a Day of Prayer and Fasting for Peace and Reconciliation was very well received by Christians all over the country. People at large have appreciated the efforts by various churches to promote and restore trust and goodwill among people of all religions and communities. The Church leaders in the country appealed to all members of Christian community in the country to work for the welfare of all sections of people in society in spite of such horrendous experiences of violence and death of some members of the community. As the World Council of Churches is deeply disturbed by these developments of religious violence in Orissa and has expressed its concern in a letter by the General Secretary addressed to the Prime Minister of India. A pastoral letter from WCC General Secretary expressing sympathy and solidarity to suffering Christians in Orissa was sent to WCC member churches in India and the National Council of Churches in India.
6. As the growing religious extremism and increasing violence against religious minorities in India is putting the secular credibility of India at risk, all religious groups in India have the responsibility to desist from spreading communal hatred. People should be reminded of the value and guiding principle in life that “Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour’s life”. (Leviticus 19:16).

The executive committee of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Lübeck, Germany from 22-26 September 2008, therefore:

- A. **Expresses** its concern about the alarming trend of growing communal violence and religious intolerance in India;
- B. **Expresses** its concern about the organized violence and atrocities against Christians in Orissa and other parts of India;
- C. **Appeals** to the central and state governments to take necessary measures to bring back hundreds of Tribal and Dalit Christian villagers in Kandhmal, Orissa who are still hiding for their lives in forests;
- D. **Urges** the government of India to take steps to prevent violence, and harassments against the Christian minorities in Orissa and other parts of the country and take appropriate actions against actors responsible for attacks;
- E. **Urges** the Orissa government to take immediate steps to rehabilitate the victims in their own villages and provide compensations and grant for them to rebuild their houses;
- F. **Appeals** to the government, civil society organisations, religious groups and political parties to initiate confidence building measures to restore mutual trust, peace and reconciliation among people of different faiths in affected areas;
- G. **Supports** the initiatives taken by churches in India to ensure peace and reconciliation in spite of their struggle, pain and agony;
- H. **Commends** the role played by church leaders at various levels, especially their readiness to be engaged in dialogue with other religious leaders and the appeal made to Christians to be restrain from any retaliation.
- I. **Urges** the government authorities in India to meet its constitutional obligations to ensure that religious minorities may equally enjoy freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess practice and adopt religion.