

Droits de l'homme sans frontières
Human Rights Without Frontiers

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Conference “Interfaith Dialogue toward Global Peace”

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Peace Embassy, Rue Erasme 31, 1070 Brussels

Religious intolerance and interfaith dialogue

Ladies and gentlemen,

In my capacity of director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l*, I first want to thank the organizers of this conference for their efforts aiming at promoting tolerance and respect between various faiths around the world. I also feel honored to have been invited to this international multi-faith event.

We all believe in the centrality of the human person, in the necessary respect for human rights, in the need for increased promotion of social justice and peace for all. When human rights are violated, the dignity of the human person suffers; when justice is compromised, peace itself is jeopardized. Justice is truly human only when the ethical and moral vision grounding it is centered on the human person and his inalienable dignity.

In my short intervention about religious intolerance and interfaith dialogue, I would like to focus on a country which is a source of serious concern for *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l* in the field of religious intolerance. It is India, a democratic country enjoying a fast-growing economy and a huge development of its universities.

However, the dark side of this country is the intolerance manifested through repeated violent acts by extremist politico-religious groups who instrumentalize the peaceful Hindu religion to promote a political and ideological agenda.

We are monitoring incidents of religious violence in India. This year, we registered more than a hundred of such cases but many more were not brought to our knowledge.

In under a year over 190 cases of Hindu persecution of Christians

On 17 November, the *All India Catholic Union*, an association grouping together lay Catholics, published a document about anti-Christian persecution in India. The report underlines that over 190 violent attacks against Christians took place in less than one year in India. These assaults include homicide, armed assault, sexual molestation and lynching. The report also highlights the widespread marginalisation of non Hindus, and government apathy with regard to aggressors. The President of the Catholic Union, John Dayal, stressed that the numerous cases where Christians were attacked for reasons other than their faith were not taken into account.

The Bangalore based Global Council of Indian Christians recorded 464 cases of violence against Christians throughout India over 20 months, Karnataka having the worst record in this period with 87 cases, followed by Madhya Pradesh with 30 cases. Many of these attacks have occurred inside private homes and in places of worship of Christians while people were worshipping. Often, the Administration and Police refused to either file or pursue the matter with seriousness.

Cases of religious intolerance and violence

On 30 January, a Christian convert, was beaten by his fellow Hindu villagers for refusing to “reconvert” to Hinduism. The attack occurred in a village of the state of Assam. The victim converted two years ago after marrying a Christian woman. At the village council, the elders pressured him to return to Hinduism; however, when he refused, they denounced him. Some of the villagers, armed with sticks, attacked the couple and broke down a part of their humble mud house. Both husband and wife fled the village and sought refuge in the local police station.

On 7 September, a group of about 10 Hindu extremists tied an evangelist to a tree for at least three hours before chasing him out of his village near Bangalore, in Karnataka state. The evangelist was distributing Christian tracts to villagers in front of his house when he was attacked, tied up, and threatened. After being released, the evangelist went to a hospital for first-aid.

On 8 September, in a village of Bihar state, Hindu extremists (of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, World Hindu Council or VHP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stormed a Pentecostal church meeting, forcibly took the pastor to a Hindu temple and made him recite slogans about Hindu god Rama.

On 7 October, more than 100 extremists launched an attack on Christian worshippers during a religious service in a village of workers of Karnataka state. The extremists beat the pastor while accusing them of forcibly converting Hindu villagers. Pastor Simon, who received serious injuries, was admitted to the local hospital. The police registered a complaint against the attackers but no arrests were made.

On Sunday 4 November, Hindu extremists armed with wooden clubs barged into the worship service of the Mumbai Diocesan Missionary Movement in Kuttal village of Wada and beat several members brutally. When Pastor Suresh Suttar went to the police station to file a complaint against his aggressors, officers detained him instead for allegedly converting Hindus; unable to find any evidence for charges of fraudulent

conversion, they released him on the next day, according to Dr. Abraham Mathai, vice chairperson of the Maharashtra State Minorities Commission.

We have identified at least ten Hindu extremist groups which are regularly involved in acts of violence against Christians in India in total impunity.

Laws exist to prosecute the authors of such violence but for various reasons, impunity is the rule in practice. Moreover, tolerance, respect, justice and peace cannot be imposed by law. It is a matter of education. That is the reason why I recommend to the Universal Peace Federation and the Institute of Peace and Development to work with Indian organizations of various religious backgrounds in order to educate the Indian public opinion and youth about the international standards guaranteeing religious freedom and tolerance.

I thank you for your attention.

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