

Archbishop: Orissa Christians fearful as anniversary of violence nears

BHUBANESWAR, India - A Catholic archbishop said Christians in the Indian state of Orissa are becoming more fearful with the approach of the first anniversary of the anti-Christian violence they experienced.

Archbishop Raphael Cheenath of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar said that Christians are tense after an Aug. 6 attack on a Catholic worker, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

A gang attacked Chikusagar Nayak, who works with the archdiocese's justice and peace commission in the Kandhamal district, the center of last year's violence. Nayak suffered a broken arm in the attack.

When the attack occurred Nayak was returning on a motorbike to Udayagiri, a town in Kandhamal, from a village where he had gone to counsel victims of last year's violence.

Archbishop Cheenath said the Catholic youth is helping to prepare witnesses for court cases against perpetrators of the violence.

He said people are afraid because "hard-core criminals are still on the loose." The prelate said only a few people accused in last year's violence have been arrested. Some of them have even been acquitted for lack of sufficient evidence and are threatening victims and witnesses, he added.

He also said people are reluctant to move from relief camps where they have been living for a year.

Police in Orissa have registered more than 1,000 cases related to the anti-Christian violence that began Aug. 24, one day after a Hindu religious leader and his four associates were killed in Kandhamal. Maoists claimed responsibility for the killings. About 90 people died and about 50,000 - mostly Christians - were displaced, according to Catholic leaders.

Christians say Hindu militants have threatened victims and witnesses and told them not to appear in court to testify against them, UCA News reported.

Archbishop Cheenath said he foresees more trouble because Hindu groups have announced a weeklong celebration of Janmashtmi (the birthday of Lord Krishna) starting Aug. 13.

Earlier, Christian groups had asked Hindus to help them observe Aug. 23 as peace and harmony day, but the Hindu groups ignored the appeal.

The archdiocese plans to send a memorandum to federal and state officials seeking increased security for Christians in Orissa.