

U.S. religious freedom watchdog adds India to its watch list

WASHINGTON - Increasing violence against religious minorities, particularly Christians, and the government's inadequate response to that violence in 2008 prompted the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to add India to its 2009 watch list of countries where conditions of religious freedom require close monitoring.

The announcement was made Aug. 12, although the commission's annual report was released in May. Earlier, the commission requested a visit to India to discuss religious freedom conditions with government officials, religious leaders and activists, but the Indian government did not issue visas to the U.S. delegation. Indian officials also failed to offer an alternative date to meet, as requested by the commission.

Leonard Leo, chairman of the commission, told Catholic News Service Aug. 13 that commission members were encouraged by Indians' "democratic society and their growing relations with the U.S., but there are serious problems that require attention, and they can't choose to stick their heads in the sand rather than have constructive discussions about the situation in Orissa," the state in eastern India where the violence occurred.

The commission designated India as a "country of particular concern" in 2002 and 2003 following a sharp rise in communal violence against religious minorities after Hindu nationalist organizations gained support in communities. A combination of inadequate protection of religious rights and the 2002 and 2008 violence against Muslims and Christians led to India's placement on the watch list this year, said the commission.

In making its announcement, the commission included extensive background on India's history of violence toward religious groups, although it noted that "India is a multiethnic, multireligious, multilingual democracy of more than a billion people that boasts the vibrant representation of all the world's major religions." It noted

that the country has an independent judiciary and media and numerous government watchdog groups.

“In practice, however, India’s democratic institutions charged with upholding the rule of law, most notably state and central judiciaries and police, lack capacity and have emerged as unwilling or unable to consistently seek redress for victims of religiously motivated violence or to challenge cultures of impunity in areas with a history of communal tensions,” the report said.

The commission recommended that India change certain laws that might undermine freedom of religion and put in place measures to prevent communal violence. The commission also suggested that India address the existing violence in two specific areas: Gujarat and Orissa states.

After a Hindu religious leader was murdered in 2008, a violent campaign began in Orissa. The attacks targeted Christians and resulted in at least 40 deaths and more than 60,000 Christians fleeing their homes.

“The inadequate police response failed to quell the violence, and early central government intervention had little impact,” the report said. “Mass arrests following the Orissa violence did not translate into the actual filing of cases. Also, efforts continue to lag to prosecute the perpetrators of the 2002 Hindu-Muslim riots in Gujarat, in which over 2,000 were killed, the majority of whom were Muslim.”

Failure to provide timely justice to victims has contributed to a feeling of impunity, the report said. For example, it said, it was not until this year that India’s Central Bureau of Investigation announced an investigation into one high-profile riot that occurred in 1993.

India’s National Commission for Minorities found that during the 2002 riots the Indian government not only failed to prevent the attacks against religious minorities but that government officials participated in the violence, the U.S. report said.

The restricted freedoms and rights of religious minorities in India, especially in Orissa, are also a cause of concern for the minorities commission and the United Nations, the religious freedom report said, citing India’s quota system as one factor

worsening tensions between Hindus and Christians.

It said the quota system was established to give dalits, or members of low castes once considered “untouchables,” a share of government jobs. However, dalit Christians and Muslims are not receiving the same benefits from the system as their dalit Hindu counterparts, the report added.