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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 May 2016]

1 * This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Religious Freedom and Protections of Minorities in India

Religious discrimination towards minorities in India has worsened since the Bharatiya Janata Party (hereafter, the BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has come into power. Religious minorities, mainly Muslims (14.2%), Christians (2.3%), Sikhs (1.7%) and Buddhists (0.7%), are being discriminated against on a daily basis and often subject to violent acts of repression and/or conversion into Hinduism. The situation of Dalits, the lowest rank of the Indian caste-based society, is also that of increased discrimination especially over land issues.

Hindu extremists are often free to act, since local, regional or national police forces do not promptly act in order to stop the violence. Impunity is common among courts; this reinforces the acts of discriminations and encourages their perpetuation. The government is remaining silent about the violence that is spreading all over the country, thus tacitly allowing extremist groups to act with no fear of an actual trial. In this way, while the administration is publicly condemning international terrorist acts, it has chosen to remain silent on its national issues, where any religion outside Hinduism is perceived as a threat to the national identity.

Fundamentalists are spreading over the territory, especially in those States ruled by the BJP. Different Indian regions have witnessed violence or discriminatory acts against minorities, and cases of State impunity are increasing.

Just in 2016, hundreds of serious discrimination cases were reported, some of them involving the loss of human lives. The media coverage on these events is inconsistent and fragmented, thus making it difficult to track the actual volume of cases involving religious discrimination. The lack of political interest and media coverage surrounding such event reflects the general Indian government's silent acceptance on this kind of repressive actions. Some recent illustrative events are hereafter reported.

Christians

On May 6, 2016, Lutheran ministry Abraham Soreng of Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church was murdered in Jharkhand. His dead body was found with multiple injuries. A few days before, on May 2, a hate campaign was carried out in Satna, Madhya Pradesh, where only a week earlier the police entered a Church and stopped a wedding claiming that the couple had been unlawfully converted. These kind of discriminatory and violent acts are increasingly frequent in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, three BJP-ruled tribal States. Furthermore Orissa, ruled by BJP in the past, often witnesses violence against Christians.

Muslims

A common ground of violence is usually on beef consumption, a taboo in Hinduism where cows are sacred. On March 16, two Muslims, of which a minor, were hanged from a tree after being brutally tortured for allegedly consuming beef. The murders were committed in Balumath, 110 km from Ranchi, in Jharkhand. The attackers were vigilantes who allegedly belonged to the BJP. Some days before, four Muslims students were arrested in Rajasthan on the ground of eating beef, and it was later found to be goat meat.

Lower Casts

Dozens of discriminatory events of different intensity have already taken place since the beginning of 2016. On 20 May, BJP MP Tarun Vijay, together with Daulat Kunwar, a BSP Dalit leader, was violently attacked for having allowed Dalits to enter the Silgur Devta temple in Chakrata where traditionally only upper casts are allowed. The mob was reported to be at least 2,000 people strong and investigations are currently taking place. On May 23, Edungu Gamangu, an Adivasi activist and leader known for fighting for the rights of tribal people, was found murdered in Odisha. Notwithstanding the cruelty of this act, the media coverage on this case is extremely poor, and the it seems to be almost completely ignored by the press.

The lack of political will to tackle effectively and efficiently the offenders committing this kind of atrocious acts towards minorities causes an empowerment of nationalist groups. The Indian government, whose secularity is enshrined in its Constitution, should acknowledge its lack of law enforcement and should promptly intervene condemning and taking action against any ultra-nationalist action of discrimination and violence towards minorities.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the UN Human Rights Council to call on the government of India to:

- take action against the persistence of discrimination in the country based on religion and caste hierarchy;
 - enforce the existing laws and implement human rights protection policies consistently and systematically;
 - increase its efforts to protect the fundamental values of human rights and freedom of religion, especially for the religious minorities;
 - ensure the right to a fair and impartial trial with no discrimination according to the rule of law;
 - consider the civil society's voice on the debate on India's religious freedoms.
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