

## **Indian Bishops Decry Lack of Safety for Christians**

### **Urge Government to Follow Constitution**

NEW DELHI, India, SEPT. 30, 2008 (Zenit.org) - The Indian episcopal conference is decrying the lack of government response to the wave of anti-Christian violence wrought by Hindu extremists.

They are further asserting that the allegation used by fundamentalists to justify the attacks -- that Christians force conversions of Hindus -- is "merely a strategy developed by vested interests in order to prevent Christian services of health, education, poverty alleviation and development on behalf of deprived communities."

The episcopal conference affirmed this in a message Friday that responded to a wave of anti-Christian attacks that intensified at the end of August. The message was signed by Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil of Ernakulam-Angamaly and Archbishop Stanislaus Fernandes of Gandhinagar, respectively president and secretary-general of the conference.

The violence comes as the European Union and India work toward a free trade deal, though some members of European Parliament are insisting that India improve its human rights record, particularly in regard to the issue of anti-Christian violence.

The bishops' message expressed concern about the authenticity of democracy in India, saying: "It is India's fair name that has been tarnished and her secular and democratic image seriously damaged before the international community."

They made seven demands of the government, including that "stronger and stringent action be taken against all kinds of anti-social and anti-religious elements that violate human rights and terrorize innocent people" and that "a ban be imposed on fundamentalist groups that train 'terrorists' under the banner of Hindutva or any other name."

Nothing forced

A main part of the prelates' message was to disprove Hindu fundamentalist claims that the attacks are retribution for Christians forcing conversions.

In a nation where the caste system continues to be used in rural areas, the bishops contended that the allegation of forced conversions derives from fear that low-class communities could gain power.

They affirmed: "Conversion by force, allurements or deception goes against the teaching of the Catholic Church. [] It is truly humiliating to the poor to claim that they easily yield to the temptation of converting to any religion for some material advantage. In fact, the

poor who choose Christianity forfeit so many benefits guaranteed by the Constitution. Some have even sacrificed their lives for refusing to reconvert. []

"We perceive that the Hindutva opposition to Christian activities derives from the fear that many of the deprived communities may be so empowered as to assert their own rights and resist exploitation. No matter how great the threat that may confront us, we cannot renounce the heritage of love and justice that Jesus left us."