

November 20, 2009

The President  
The White House  
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President:

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) respectfully urges you to raise concerns about freedom of religion or belief in your upcoming meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India. India is the world's largest democracy and home to a multitude of religious communities that have historically coexisted peacefully; however, the Indian government has failed to bring the perpetrators and instigators of sectarian violence to justice. For this reason, USCIRF named India to its Watch List in August, 2009; a copy of our report with Commissioner comments is attached.

In India's 2004 elections, the Congress Party – of which Prime Minister Singh is a member – espoused an inclusive platform and repeatedly pledged its commitment to religious tolerance. The Congress Party reiterated this pledge in the 2009 elections for the lower house of Parliament, in which the Congress Party emerged victorious. The Congress Party thus has a solid record for vocalizing its support for a peaceful religious pluralism in India. However, its words have not translated into actions to protect religious freedom throughout the country.

This is most evident in the Indian government's inadequate responses to sectarian violence, and this discrepancy has produced a culture of impunity, where those who commit crimes against religious minority groups do not expect punishment by law. A year ago, a prolonged and destructive campaign targeting Christians in the province of Orissa led to the displacement of approximately 40,000 people and at least 40 deaths. There were also accounts of forced re-conversions to Hinduism of Christians returning to their villages following the violence. Reportedly, although many thousands of accusations against alleged perpetrators were made in the aftermath of this violence, to date there have been few convictions. Many displaced residents are still living in camps.

India's failure to provide justice to religious minorities targeted in violent riots is not a new development. In February 2002, Hindu mobs – angered by a train fire that resulted in the death of 58 Hindus returning from Ayodhya – killed 2,000 Muslims in the Gujarat province and displaced over 100,000 people. Evidence of state government and police complicity in the attacks emerged in 2007. Court convictions, however, remain minimal, and Muslims living in the

Gujarat province remain in a state of fear and insecurity. Similarly, the architects and perpetrators of massive, country-wide attacks on Sikhs in 1984 that resulted in the deaths of over 3,000 Sikhs remain largely unprosecuted.

As you noted in your remarks last January on the fifty-eighth anniversary of Indian democracy, the United States and India have a shared belief in “democracy, liberty, pluralism and religious tolerance.” Therefore, in the spirit of partnership, we encourage you to raise these issues with Prime Minister Singh to address the culture of impunity for perpetrators of violence against religious groups in India, and to prevent future incidents of sectarian violence against religious minorities.

Sincerely,

Leonard Leo  
Chair

Cc: Robert O. Blake, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs  
Michael H. Posner, Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights,  
and Labor

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