

## March 12, 2002: U.S. Must Help India Foster a Climate of Religious Tolerance, Commission Says

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has observed with great concern the rioting between religious groups in India over the past weeks that has taken more than 600 lives. Reports indicate that both Hindus and Muslims have instigated violence. In all cases, regardless of who the perpetrators are, the Commission unequivocally condemns such attacks and urges the U.S. government to press Indian authorities to exercise their power immediately to halt the atrocities and violence and bring the perpetrators to justice. In its report of May 1, 2001, the Commission expressed its concern about the recent increase in violence against religious minorities in India, particularly Muslims and Christians, that has been associated with the rise in power of Hindu nationalist organizations, including the Vishva Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, as well as their political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). These groups are collectively known as the Sangh Parivar. The BJP has led the national government since 1998 in coalition with regional parties (some without nationalist leanings). The ideology of the Sangh Parivar holds that only Hindus are "real" Indians, suggesting that non-Hindus are foreigners and thus deserving of suspicion and even attack. Sangh Parivar groups argue that the previous leaders of India failed to create a nation sufficiently grounded in Hindu culture, and that Western thought, including the concept of secular government, is dangerous and detrimental to India, along with conversion to what they claim are "foreign" religions such as Islam and Christianity. Members of other religious communities are thus portrayed as foreign implants, and their patriotism and status as true Indian citizens are frequently called into question by Sangh Parivar groups. It is hard to imagine a set of views and values less appropriate in a country that is home to one of the world's largest Muslim populations (about 120 million) and 20 million to 30 million Christians. The United States government must speak out strongly against both the increasing attacks on minorities and the ideology of hate behind them. The Indian government must also do more to root out the causes of such tragedies, especially by resolving the impasse over the Muslim Babri mosque in Ayodhya destroyed by Hindu nationalists in 1992, and where Hindu nationalists are vowing to construct a Hindu temple instead. As the United States deepens its engagement with India, it must work with the Indian government to help foster an atmosphere of greater religious tolerance in that country. As the Commission recommended in its May report, the U.S. government should: press India to pursue perpetrators of violent acts that target members of religious groups; make clear its concern to the BJP-led government that virulent nationalist rhetoric is fueling an atmosphere in which perpetrators believe they can attack religious minorities with impunity; encourage and facilitate private-sector communication and exchanges between American and Indian religious groups and other non-governmental organizations interested in religious freedom; allocate funds from U.S. foreign-assistance programs for the promotion of education on religious toleration and inclusiveness in India; seek ways to respond positively through enhanced economic ties to Indian government efforts to protect religious freedom. The full text of the report on India is available on the Commission's Web site at [www.uscirf.gov](http://www.uscirf.gov).

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