

## **Table of Contents**

- ***Arson attack on cathedral compound frightens Nepal's Catholics***
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# **Arson attack on cathedral compound frightens Nepal's Catholics**

***"From time to time we Catholics here feel discriminated against, and, even though we are Nepalese citizens, we are treated [by a small minority of Nepalese] like foreigners."***

By Maria Lozano

Aid to Church in Need (28.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qIT5UP> - An arson attack on the cathedral Church of Apostolic Vicariate of Nepal has left the country's small Catholic community in a state of shock.

The April 18, 2017 incident attack also damaged the rectory attached to Church of the Assumption, on the outskirts of the capital city of Kathmandu. No one was injured. Nonetheless, the vicar general of the vicariate, Father Silas Bogati, told international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need that the attack "has harmed the tiny Catholic community, which is now afraid. We are trusting in God, but what has happened is a call to be vigilant."

The attack happened as Nepal is experiencing a very delicate political situation, with local elections slated for May 14, 2017—the first such vote in 20 years. Parliamentary elections are scheduled to take place in January 2018.

Father Bogati reported that at least three individuals entered the church compound during the night, using gasoline to set fire to two motorcycles and a car. Ten people were sleeping in the rectory building that night. The priest said: "Thank God the vehicle they set on fire did not explode while the people were being evacuated, but it could well have been a tragedy."

He continued: "We still don't know who was behind it, nor the motives for the attack. The police are investigating the event and attempting to identify the three people seen on the security cameras. Once we know more about the perpetrators, we will be clearer about their motives. For now everything would be speculation."

The Nepalese priest did however acknowledge that "from time to time we Catholics here feel discriminated against, and, even though we are Nepalese citizens, we are treated [by a small minority of Nepalese] like foreigners, based on the mere fact of being Christians. [For that reason], in some sectors of society there are feelings of hostility towards the Christian community."

In May 2009 a bomb exploded inside the cathedral just as Father Bogati was saying Mass. Three people were killed and more than a dozen sustained injuries. Responsibility for that attack was claimed by a Hindu fundamentalist group calling itself the Nepal Defense Army.

The Catholic Church in Nepal, despite comprising just some 8,000 faithful, is very active in the area of social services and development. For example, the Church is involved in the rebuilding of 5000 homes that were badly damaged in the major earthquake that struck the country two years ago; another project aims to restore water supply to various

neighborhoods. The vicar general said that the Church is “helping people regardless of their religious affiliation. Our vocation is to help the most needy, as we are helping the victims of the earthquake today.”

A former Hindu kingdom, Nepal formally became a secular state in 2007 after a decade of conflict between the government and Maoist rebels. A new constitution was adopted in summer 2015 that affirms the secular character of Nepal, while still safeguarding the primacy of Hinduism at the expense of religious minorities, including the sizeable Muslim and Buddhist communities. The number of Protestants in Nepal is close to 1 million; the total population is approx. 28 million. The upcoming elections will be crucial for strengthening the country’s still fragile political stability.

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