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## **Indian Church rejoices after release of Father Tom Uzhunnalil**

By Anto Akkara

World Watch Monitor (12.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2h2Gd1q> - India's Church, government and politicians from across the political landscape have all expressed relief and joy over the release of Salesian Father Tom Uzhunnalil, kidnapped in Yemen in March 2016.

Statements hailing the release of the Indian priest have poured in – from India's foreign minister, Sushma Swaraj, to the president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, Cardinal Baselios Cleemis.

"I am happy to inform that Father Tom Uzhunnalil has been rescued," tweeted Swaraj at 15.40 (IST), breaking the news to the nation.

Apart from thanking the Indian government for its efforts in securing the priest's release, the Catholic Bishops' Conference in its statement thanked "Pope Francis, who took personal interest in Fr. Tom's release efforts, and Bishop Paul Hinder, Vicar Apostolic of Southern Arabia, the Bishop in charge of the Middle East, and the Sultan of Oman, for their untiring efforts".

In fact, the news of Fr Uzhunnalil's release was made public after the priest had been flown to Muscat in a military aircraft.

A statement quoting the state-run Oman News Agency, published in the Oman Observer, said Fr Uzhunnalil "expressed thanks to God Almighty" following his release. "In compliance with the His Majesty, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, Oman, in coordination with the Yemeni parties, have managed find a Vatican priest," said the state-run news agency's statement. "He has been transferred to Muscat, from where he will return to his home in Kerala. Tom Uzhunnalil, a Vatican priest, expressed thanks to God Almighty and appreciation to His Majesty Sultan Qaboos. He also thanked his brothers and sisters and all relatives and friends who called on God for [his] safety and release."

Father Joyce Francis from Bangalore, part of the Salesian order to which Fr Uzhunnalil belongs, also confirmed the news to World Watch Monitor. "We are thrilled. There are no words to describe our joy," Fr Uzhunnalil's cousin, V A Thomas, told World Watch Monitor from the family's native Ramapuram parish.

"People are excited and distributing sweets," added Thomas, who had been headmaster to Fr Uzhunnalil when he was a student in the local Catholic school in the 1970s.

"I got the news from a contact in Muscat," Major Archbishop Cardinal George Alencherry, head of the Syro Malabar Church to which Fr Uzhunnalil belongs, told World Watch Monitor, after leading a thanksgiving prayer at the St Mary's Basilica in Kochi.

"Father Tom is now being taken to the Vatican," Cardinal Alencherry confirmed to World Watch Monitor, contrary to earlier news reports that he was being flown to Kerala.

Cardinal Alencherry had earlier called for special prayers and candlelit vigils after a video was released of the visibly ailing priest in captivity.

### **Background**

Father Tom Uzhunnalil, 58, was abducted from the Missionaries of Charity home for the elderly in Aden on 4 March 2016. During the raid, unidentified gunmen killed four Indian nuns, two Yemeni female staff members, eight elderly residents and a guard.

Originally from the Indian state of Kerala, Fr Uzhunnalil had worked in Yemen for 14 years, moving to the care home in 2015 after Aden's Holy Family Church, where he served, was set on fire.

In March 2016, a false rumour circulated that the Islamic State group had crucified Fr Uzhunnalil on Good Friday. But then at Christmas 2016 a video of him in captivity surfaced, with the visibly unkempt and ailing priest – who is diabetic and has high blood pressure – urging the government of India and the Church to ensure his release.

That led to a series of assurances from the Indian government, while the Catholic Church organised several demonstrations, including a day of prayer and candlelit vigils, urging the government to ensure the kidnapped priest's safe release.

A second video appeal by the priest surfaced on the Internet in May 2017, with the priest stating that serious efforts had not been made by the Church or the government to ensure his release.

Fr Uzhunnalil, speaking slowly in English, said: "They are treating me well to the extent they are able. My health condition is deteriorating quickly and I require hospitalisation as early as possible."

In July 2017 Yemen confirmed to India's foreign minister that Fr Uzhunnalil was still "alive".

After the second video emerged, his cousin, VA Thomas, said his family had been "consistently pleading with everyone to ensure Fr Tom's release" and had called on several top government leaders.

Thomas added that he had led a four-member Uzhunnalil delegation to meet P Sathasivam, the Kerala Governor, along with Oommen Chandy, former chief minister of Kerala, on 31 May.

Three days earlier, the federal government had dispatched Richard Hay, a Christian Member of the Indian Parliament (who had been nominated by the ruling BJP government), to the family in Palai, to assure them that the government was making serious efforts "to bring the back the priest home safely".

### **Christianity in Yemen**

Following the March 2016 attack, initial media reports blamed Ansar al-Sharia, but the Islamist group, which is linked with Al-Qaeda, denied responsibility. Later, the attack was blamed on the Islamic State group.

Militants from both IS and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula have exploited the chaos and lawlessness prevailing nationwide since Yemen's civil war erupted in 2015.

"We knew that the situation was difficult and that the sisters were running a certain risk," Bishop Paul Hinder, apostolic vicar of the Arabian Peninsula, said after the four nuns were murdered.

"The Missionaries of Charity died as martyrs," he told Catholic News Agency. "For me there is no doubt that the sisters have been victims of hatred – hatred against our faith."

He added that he believed they were targeted because certain radical groups in Yemen "simply do not support the presence of Christians who serve the poorest of the poor".

However, he said this violent Islamist attitude "obviously goes against the mainstream thought of the Yemeni people, the majority of whom appreciate the presence of the Missionaries of Charity as well as their dedicated service to the poor".

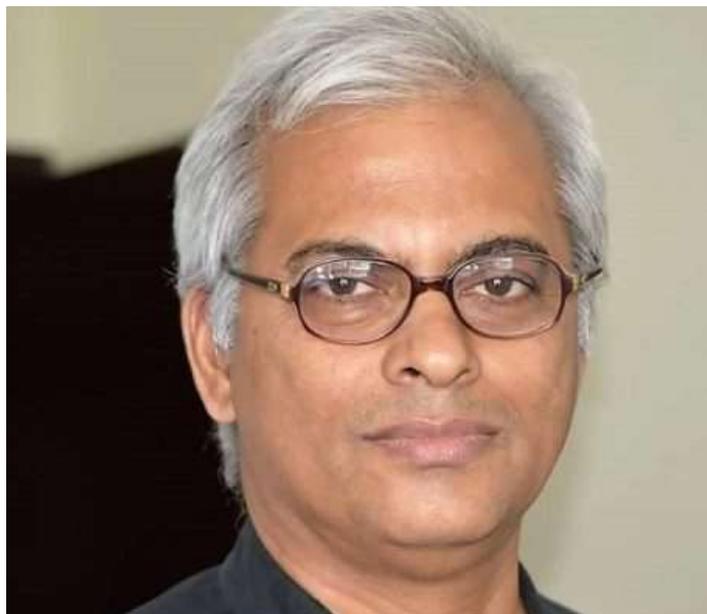
Back in July 1998, three sisters of the Missionaries of Charity were shot dead by a Muslim extremist near the nuns' clinic for the elderly and impoverished in Hodeidah. The apprehended killer, who told police he would "go to heaven for this deed", accused the nuns of trying to convert Yemenis to Christianity.

Four of Mother Teresa's convents were set up in Yemen after the invitation of the then northern government in 1973. The Catholic sisters still serving in these convents in Hodeidah, Taiz, Sanaa and Aden care for mentally and physically challenged children and elderly people.

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## **Church relieved as Yemen confirms kidnapped Indian priest is 'alive'**

By Anto Akkara



World Watch Monitor (14.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2tVLKgg> - The Church in India, especially in the southern state of Kerala, is breathing a sigh of relief after Yemen confirmed to India's foreign minister that Catholic missionary Father Tom Uzhunnalil, kidnapped in Yemen in March 2016, is "alive".

"We are thrilled to hear that good news," Cardinal George Alencherry, Major Archbishop of the autonomous Syro-Malabar Church, to which the kidnapped priest belongs, told World Watch Monitor.

Abdulmalik Abduljalil Al-Mekhlafi, Deputy Prime Minister of Yemen, broke the news to Sushma Swaraj, Indian External Affairs (foreign) Minister on 12 July when they met for bilateral talks in the Indian capital.

"We are very hopeful now. The news brings great joy to us," V A Thomas, first cousin of the kidnapped priest, told World Watch Monitor from their home in Ramapuram, near Palai, in the Christian heartland of Kerala.

***"We are very happy with the developments and hope he will be released soon."***

### **V A Thomas**

Father Uzhunnalil, 58, was [kidnapped on 4 March in Aden in Yemen](#), from the Missionaries of Charity home for the elderly. Four nuns were murdered, along with 12 others, during the attack by unidentified gunmen.

While a first false rumour was of the [crucifixion of the kidnapped priest](#) on Good Friday 2016, a video of him in captivity surfaced around Christmas 2016, with the visibly unkempt and ailing priest urging the government of India and the Church to ensure his release from captivity.

That led to a [series of assurances](#) from the government of India, while the Catholic Church organised several demonstrations, including a day of prayer and candlelit vigils, urging the government to ensure the kidnapped priest's safe release.

A [second video appeal](#) by the priest surfaced on the Internet in May, with the priest stating that serious efforts have not been made by the Church or the government to ensure his release. "They are treating me well to the extent they are able," Fr Uzhunnalil said slowly in English. "My health condition is deteriorating quickly and I require hospitalisation as early as possible."

"In that video appeal, Father Tom had even requested us [his family] to put pressure [on the government] to ensure his release," said his cousin, V A Thomas, who was also headmaster to Father Uzhunnalil when he was a student at the local Catholic school in the 1970s.

The extended Uzhunnalil family clan, Thomas pointed out, had been "consistently pleading with everyone to ensure Fr Tom's release" and have called on several top government leaders.

After the second video emerged, Thomas said that he led a four-member Uzhunnalil delegation to meet P Sathasivam, the Kerala Governor, along with Oommen Chandy, former chief minister of Kerala, on 31 May.



Ex-Kerala Chief Minister Oommen Chandy leads an Uzhunnalil family delegation to meet P Sathasivam, Governor of Kerala, to plead for Father Tom Uzhunnalil's release, 31 May, 2017

Three days earlier, the federal government had dispatched Richard Hay, a Christian Member of the Indian Parliament (who'd been nominated by the ruling BJP government), to the family in Palai, to assure them that the government was making serious efforts "to bring the back the priest home safely".

"We are very happy with the developments and hope he will be released soon," Thomas said.

However, he added that "due to the big public interest in the safety of Fr Tom, there are reports that the demands of the kidnappers have gone up".

The External Affairs Ministry in its press statement said that the foreign minister has "stressed the government's concern for the safety and well-being of Father Tom

Uzhunnalil ... and reiterated the request for continued assistance from the Yemeni authorities in securing his safe and early release”.

According to reports, terror groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are said to have bases in parts of Yemen, resulting in instability in the country.

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## **UN Expert: Persecution of Baha'is in Yemen mirrors Iran's actions**

Baha'i International Community (29.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2rjWBQ3> - In a statement issued on Monday, 22 May, the UN Special Rapporteur on religious freedom highlighted the striking resemblance of recent assaults against the Baha'is in Yemen to that of the persecution of the Baha'is in Iran.

“The recent escalation in the persistent pattern of persecution of the Baha'i community in Sana'a mirrors the persecution suffered by the Baha'is living in Iran,” said Ahmed Shaheed, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

“The harassment against the Bahá'ís, as religious minorities, seems to persist, if not worsen amounting to religious persecution in Yemen,” the human rights expert said.

In April, the authorities called for the arrest of over 25 Baha'is, many of whom are prominent members of the Baha'i community and assist with the organization of the community's affairs, under extraordinary accusations which include helping poor families, showing kindness, and displaying rectitude of conduct in order to attract people to the Baha'i Faith. Since then, and through increasingly subversive methods, including kidnappings conducted by plainclothes agents, four more Baha'is have been arrested, including Mr. Walid Ayyash, a prominent Yemeni tribal leader. As of 25 May, the authorities have detained seven Baha'is and denied them necessary medical attention.

These disturbing events constitute the latest acts in a series of assaults heaped upon the Yemeni Baha'i community. These include the 2013 arrest and ongoing court case of Mr. Hamed bin Haydara, as well as the mass arrest of over 60 participants, half of whom were Baha'is, at an educational gathering in 2016. Mr. Keiwan Qaderi, who was among those arrested, has been in prison for over eight months. More recently, on 5 April, an employee of an international organization who is a Baha'i was arrested in Sana'a simply because of his faith.

“The new wave of court summons and arrest orders appears to be an act of intimidation pressuring the Yemeni Bahá'ís to recant their faith,” Dr. Shaheed stated. “It is unacceptable for anyone, including persons belonging to religious minorities, to be targeted or discriminated based on religion or belief,” he added.

Multiple independent sources have, since 2016 and through their conversations with various officials in Yemen, repeatedly confirmed that Iranian authorities are directing efforts to persecute the Baha'is in Yemen. Specifically, Mr. Rajeh Zayed who is from the Prosecution Office and has displayed inimical behaviors against the Bahá'í community over several years, the Political Security Office, as well as high-ranking authorities in the National Security Office are known to be involved in the recent persecution against the Bahá'ís. In addition, such high-ranking authorities have been repeatedly reported as receiving instructions from Iran in order to persecute the Bahá'í community.

Diane Ala'i, a Representative of the Baha'i International Community in Geneva further commented "for the authorities in Iran to systematically persecute fellow citizens because of their belief is appalling", and she added, "but for those same authorities to also persecute citizens of other countries outside of Iran, particularly in a country facing a mounting humanitarian crisis, is utterly contemptible."

Iranian involvement in the persecution of the Baha'is in Yemen is consistent with a general policy aimed at dealing with "The Baha'i Question" as outlined in a once secret 1991 government memorandum.

That memorandum, endorsed by Iran's Supreme Leader, outlines a wide range of economic, educational, and social measures aimed at "blocking the development" of the Iranian Baha'is. It also explicitly states the intention of Iranian authorities to "confront and destroy their [the Baha'is'] cultural roots outside the country [Iran]".

"Such persecution, however, comes against the will of a local population, which has demonstrated an unprecedented level of support for the Baha'is," commented Ala'i.

In the most recent show of solidarity, hundreds of Yemenis—led by tribal leaders and human rights activists—gathered on the morning of 15 May 2017 to denounce the recent call for the arrests of several Yemeni Baha'is, among them Mr. Walid Ayyash, a prominent tribal leader, and to demand their immediate release.

During the peaceful demonstrations, Mr. Zayed threatened the crowd with a weapon and attempted to incite violence against those present. He reportedly stated that "today, blood will reach the knees". He then ordered the security forces to shoot at the protestors.

Despite the subsequent shooting that ensued, the crowd remained peaceful. Fortunately, no one was severely hurt in the incident.

Following this event, tribal leaders issued a statement calling for the release of Mr. Ayyash, detailing the events of 15 May, and requesting the judiciary to prosecute Mr. Zayed for "his intentional harm of Sheikh Walid Ayyash and his friends, and continuation of physical harm and suspicion of attempted murder," as well as "the explicit assault with live ammunition of nonviolent citizens participating in a peaceful protest, and the violent acts that could have led to a disaster costing the lives of scores of people."

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## **Yemen must stop persecution of Bahá'í community, urges UN expert on freedom of religion**

OHCHR (22.05.2019) - <http://bit.ly/2sdI8Fc> - "The recent escalation in the persistent pattern of persecution of the Bahá'í community in Sana'a mirrors the persecution suffered by the Bahá'ís living in Iran," said today the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed. "Many Yemeni Bahá'í families in Sana'a have left their homes and live in constant fear," he warned.

"The harassment against the Bahá'ís, as religious minorities, seems to persist, if not worsen amounting to religious persecution in Yemen," the human rights expert said. "It is unacceptable for anyone, including persons belonging to religious minorities, to be targeted or discriminated based on religion or belief."

Mr. Shaheed's warning comes after the Public Prosecutor reportedly summoned on 17 April 2017 at least thirty Yemeni Bahá'ís by phone to appear in court. At the same time, the authorities in Sana'a issued arrest orders of at least twenty-five Bahá'ís, pressuring them to recant their faith.

In addition, two Yemeni Bahá'ís, Walid Ayyash and Mahmood Humaid, were reportedly arrested by political security officers at a check point near the city border of Hudiedah. Their whereabouts are unknown since their arrests.

"The new wave of court summons and arrest orders appears to be an act of intimidation pressuring the Yemeni Bahá'ís to recant their faith," the Special Rapporteur said. "The Yemeni authorities, including the de facto authorities in Sana'a, have failed to respond to the call made by my predecessor and other UN independent experts last year."

"The Houthi de facto authorities in Sana'a must stop summoning or arresting the Bahá'ís and immediately release all Bahá'ís arbitrarily detained," he stressed. "They must also start an inquiry into the disappearances of Mr. Ayyash and Mr. Humaid, and provide details of the investigation."

The expert furthermore recalled the case of Hamid Kamali Bin Haydara, arrested in 2013, and remains incarcerated in the National Security Prison for 'compromising the independence of the Republic of Yemen', including spreading the Bahá'í faith in the Republic of Yemen. His trial has been postponed on numerous occasions up till 1 August 2017. The expert also urged for the release of two other Bahá'ís, Kaiwan Mohamed Ali Qadri and Pazhohesh Sana'í who remain detained since their arrests.

The Special Rapporteur reminded the Yemeni Official Government and the de facto authorities in Sana'a that the right to freedom of conscience, thought, religion or belief is a non-derogable right under any circumstance. To this end, he further reminded both official and de facto authorities of the right of persons not to be arbitrarily detained for exercising religious freedom or for belonging to a religious minority.

Mr. Ahmed Shaheed (the Maldives) was appointed as Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief by the UN Human Rights Council in 2016. Mr. Shaheed is a Visiting Professor at Essex University, UK; a former member of the Maldivian presidential Commission Investigating Corruption; and a foreign policy advisor to the President of the Maldives. He was Foreign Minister of the Maldives from 2005 to 2007 and from 2008 to 2010. He led the country's efforts to sign and ratify all nine international human rights Conventions and to implement them in law and practice. Mr. Shaheed is the former Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran.

Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures' experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.

## **Indian priest kidnapped in Yemen pleads for help**

UCA News (11.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2q9vlo5> - Indian Salesian Father Tom Uzhunnalil, kidnapped in Yemen more than a year ago has pleaded for the Indian government and the Catholic Church to do more to secure his release in a video message.

The video was posted on YouTube by the news site Aden Time May 8; Father Uzhunnalil is shown seated with a cardboard sign with the date April 15, 2017, Catholic News Service reported.

A similar video was posted in December.

An official at the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia, which includes Yemen, said May 9 the person in the video is the kidnapped Salesian.

Father Uzhunnalil was kidnapped in Aden March 4, 2016, in an attack in which four Missionaries of Charity and at least 12 others were killed at a home for the aged.

In the new video, Father Uzhunnalil began by thanking "my dear family people" for their messages of concern.

Without describing his captors or referring to them as such, he said, "they are treating me well to the extent that they are able."

"My health condition is deteriorating quickly and I require hospitalization as early as possible," he said.

Father Uzhunnalil said his captors have contacted Indian government authorities "several times" and the replies, which he said he has seen, were "very, very poor."

"They also contacted the bishop, bishop of Abu Dhabi," he said. "There, too, the response was not encouraging. Neither the bishop nor the Indian government authorities ask them what they really want to get me released. It is a poor response, and I am sad about that."

Asking his family and friends to pressure the authorities, he said, "Please, please, do what you what you can to get me released. May God bless you for that."

[View the video here](#)

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## **Ominous wave of Yemen arrests raises alarm**

Baha'i World News Service (21.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2pTMAe6> - Orders for the arrest of at least 25 Baha'is have been issued by certain authorities in Sana'a who are harassing the Yemeni Baha'is and pressuring them to recant their faith.

The baseless and nonsensical accusations levelled against the Baha'is include showing kindness and displaying rectitude of conduct in order to attract people to their Faith. These accusations bear a striking resemblance to those encountered by the Baha'is in Iran, and in fact, reports indicate the influence of Iranian authorities behind incidents transpiring in Yemen.

Recent events constitute disturbing developments in a series of assaults heaped upon the Yemeni Baha'i community. These include the 2013 arrest and ongoing court case of Mr. Hamed bin Haydara, as well as the mass arrest of over 60 participants, half of whom were Baha'is, at an educational gathering in 2016. Mr. Kaiwan Qaderi, who was among those arrested, has been in prison for over eight months. Also, just weeks ago, an employee of the Red Cross who is a Baha'i was arrested on 5 April in Sana'a simply because of his faith.

"We call upon the international community to unitedly denounce these alarming and ominous actions undertaken by specific authorities in Yemen, including the National Security and the Prosecutor's Office and demand that they stop this recent wave of arrests and release the Baha'is in prison, who are in grave danger," said Bani Dugal, principal representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations.

"Let us not," was her strong plea, "stand by and allow a case of tyranny and injustice against a religious community to unfold."

Immediately preceding the call for their arrest, on Monday 17 April, dozens of Baha'is received telephone calls between 10:30 p.m. and midnight and were told that they should appear in court the following morning. Aware of recent efforts to persecute the Baha'is and given that no official court order had been presented to them, the Baha'is agreed to send several lawyers in their stead.

However, one Baha'i, Mr. Badi'u'llah Sana'i, a prominent civil engineer in Yemen followed the advice given to him at his workplace and appeared at court on 18 April. He was immediately arrested, confirming the suspicion that the request for Baha'is to appear at court was a ploy for their arrest.

On 19 April, two additional Baha'is, including Mr. Walid Ayyash, a member of a prominent Yemeni tribe, were arrested by authorities as they were driving from the city of Ibb on route to Hudaydah. Their whereabouts are presently unknown and concerns are mounting as to their safety.

Many Baha'i families in Sana'a had to leave their homes in order to avoid being unjustly detained, including Mr. Haydara's wife, who has been fighting for his release for over three years while caring for their three daughters and is now herself on the list of those to be arrested.

During a turbulent period of civil conflict in Yemen in recent years, the members of the Baha'i community there have refused to side with one group or another and have instead endeavored to serve all people, placing particular emphasis on a youthful generation eager to dedicate its energies to the regeneration of their society.

Many Yemeni leaders from various factions have already expressed sympathy with the Baha'i community. Even amongst the Houthi authorities in Sana'a within whose jurisdiction these persecutions are taking place, some key figures, including a minister, have expressed dissatisfaction with the continuous persecution of the Baha'is, and some have even condemned these recent attacks through social media.

"We are confident in the support of many more fair-minded people of Yemen of whatever group or strata, who surely agree that the Baha'i community should be permitted to live alongside others and contribute to the betterment of their society, especially during such a difficult time for their country," said Ms. Dugal.

## **Criticised for not securing release of kidnapped priest in Yemen, Indian government says it 'told him not to go'**

World Watch Monitor (09.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2jXcESH> - India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has come under fire from his political opponents for his failure to secure the release of an Indian Catholic priest kidnapped 10 months ago in Yemen by Islamic extremists. Now Modi's Deputy Foreign Minister, M. J. Akbar, has said the priest went to Yemen "ignoring the central government's orders not to go", even though he'd lived and worked in the country for 14 years.

A five-minute video message was published on 24 December on YouTube showing the priest, Fr. Tom Uzhunnalil, gasping for breath and appearing to read from a script. In it he said: "If I were a European priest, I would have been taken more seriously. I am from India. I am perhaps not considered as of much value." He claimed his captors have sent many messages to Indian President Pranab Mukherjee and Prime Minister Modi to no avail, and criticised the Catholic Church for not having negotiated his release.

Fr. Uzhunnalil, from the Salesian Order, was abducted on 4 March 2016 from a home for the elderly in the port city of Aden run by the Missionaries of Charity. Sixteen people, including four nuns, were murdered in the attack. It is not known when the video was recorded or where he has been held.

The day after the video emerged, the Catholic Bishop of the Arabia region, which includes Yemen, issued a statement, saying: "Since the day of the abduction of Fr. Tom, the Church has made countless appeals from the highest levels to secure his release, as well as made concrete efforts by way of working in close collaboration with both international and local diplomatic channels."

The statement from Bishop Paul Hinder, Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia, added that Bishop Hinder "is in touch with the different channels who are working and are leading the dialogues to secure a safe release. More details cannot be disclosed at this stage."

In the priest's home state of Kerala, the ruling Communist party pledged that its members would send Modi 50,000 postcards demanding the Government secure his release.

Meanwhile the opposition Congress party launched a petition on New Year's Day, also calling for the Government to intervene. "They are planning to collect thousands of signatures to the memorandum that will be presented to the Indian President, Pranab Mukherjee," V. A. Thomas, the priest's cousin, told World Watch Monitor on 4 January. He added that civil society and political parties are organising rallies in the Kerala town of Ramapuram this week to put pressure on the government.

He told World Watch Monitor today (9 Jan) that Fr. Tom had gone to Abu Dhabi, where he'd met his Bishop before he moved onto Yemen.

"The government is trying defend itself while it is saying also that it is doing its best. The [Deputy Foreign] Minister's statement is confusing to us," Thomas added.

After the video appeal made national news headlines, India's foreign minister Sushma Swaraj reiterated that the Government was doing its best to secure the priest's release. She tweeted: "I have seen the video from Father Tom. He is an Indian citizen and the life of every Indian is most precious."

In addition, the federal minister for minority affairs, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, visited Cardinal George Alencherry, head of the Syro-Malabar Church to which Fr. Uzhunnalil

belongs, on 27 December and assured him that the Government was "doing everything possible".

However, the following day the Times of India published a story suggesting the priest was partly to blame for his kidnap because he returned to Yemen without government permission, and reported him "visiting" the area rather than pointing out that he had worked there for 14 years.

Another of the priest's cousins, O. S. Mathew, criticised the paper for publishing the story.

Supporters of the priest were further dismayed when the federal home minister appeared not to know about the priest's situation. The minister, Rajnath Singh, on a visit to a popular Hindu temple in the Kerala town of Guruvayoor on 28 December, was asked by journalists whether the Government was doing enough to secure the priest's release. He replied: "Who is Uzhunnalil?"

V. V. Augustine, president of the Kerala Catholic Congress that is spearheading the campaign for Fr. Uzhunnalil's release, described Singh's reaction as "embarrassing to [the] heart." Activist John Dayal, Secretary-General of the All India Christian Council, said he was "aghast" that the number two in Prime Minister Modi's Government was unaware of an issue the Christian community "has been repeatedly putting before the Government".

Three weeks after his abduction, Fr. Uzhunnalil returned to the headlines when the Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, mistakenly repeated a claim that members of ISIS had crucified him on Good Friday. A spokesman later said he could not confirm the validity of the claim, which had been made on some Arabic news websites.

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