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## **Christians in Nepal suspect Hindu extremists in sudden attacks on churches**

Morning Star News (21.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2J3oxmu> - Christians in Nepal are alarmed after this month's sudden series of arson and bomb attacks on four church buildings, and church leaders suspect authorities are lax in investigating.

At the same time, six Christians were arrested for evangelizing while suspected Hindu extremists launched attacks on three church buildings and bombed another. The attacks caused extensive property damage but no casualties.

The Hebron Church building in the eastern hilly region was set on fire on May 9, Emmanuel Church's building in western Nepal's Doti District was burned on May 10, and the Kanchanpur Emmanuel Church building in the midwest hilly region was set ablaze on May 11. Before midnight on May 12, the Mahima Church building in Dhangadhi, in western Nepal, was bombed.

Neither government officials nor police have issued a formal statement on suspects, though police have attributed the attacks to the Nepal Communist Party, known as the Biplab Group. But Christian leaders in Nepal suspect a coordinated campaign by Hindu extremists.

Police are cooperating with church leaders and taking their complaints, but officers have not made any arrests, Tanka Subedi, chair of the Religious Liberty Forum Nepal (RLFN), told Morning Star News. He suspects officials have told police to proceed slowly.

"They have not made any arrests yet, as it seems that they have been clearly notified to not carry out arrests in these cases," Subedi said.

The Mahima Church building in Dhangadhi was partially damaged around 11 p.m. on May 12 after an unknown assailant hurled a bomb into it after others broke a window. Doors, furniture, carpeting, electric appliances, the roof and windows were reported damaged.

Mahima Church pastor Birendra Kariya told Morning Star News he has faced no threats since he began leading the church in 1999. Police promised that they will investigate, but church leaders have received no response from officers about the cases, Pastor Kariya said.

Pastor B.P. Khanal of The Lord's Assembly told Morning Star News the similarity of the attacks indicated they were coordinated by a single entity.

"Though it might appear that these attacks have been carried out by the same person, geographically this is not possible," he said. "Which means that these are performed by people who are in a network and are well connected to each other."

### **Online Anti-Christian Movement**

Recently a social media movement has arisen against Christians on Facebook and Twitter with such hashtags as "Hindu Awakening against Conversion (Esai Karan ke Virudh Hindu Jagaran Abhiyaan)," openly threatening killing and attacks, Pastor Khanal said.

"They have gathered a lot of support and fan-following from the Nepali masses," he said. "These attacks have not come upon the Nepali churches as a surprise, but these are well-planned and coordinated attacks against the Christian community, and the government is doing nothing about this."

In Panchthar in the eastern hilly region, Pastor Hasta Lova Limbu of the Hebron church said there was no one in the building when it was set on fire at night. Furniture, the pulpit and the carpet were charred. A youth conference concluded a day before the May 9 attack, said Subedi of the RLFN.

Pastor Shyam Thapa of Emmanuel Church said he was in his house, constructed at the back of the church building, when it was set ablaze at 10 p.m. When he detected it, he and area police doused it after flames damaged furniture and electrical circuits.

Pastor Dharendra Rana, 34, who has been leading Kanchanpur Emmanuel Church for 10 years, said the building suffered huge property losses.

"The miscreants broke the lock of the church and formed a heap of all the stuff present in the building, including the records of the church, 300 kilograms of grain and electric appliances, and they set everything ablaze," Pastor Rana said.

He lives less than a mile from the church building, and on the morning of May 12 he found it completely burned. A church member normally sleeps at the church building to guard it, but on that night he was away at a wedding, the pastor said.

The church has not been able to meet for worship, he added.

"I reported the matter to the local police, but I have not heard anything back from them since then," Pastor Rana said.

Pastor Rana and Pastor Kariya said they suspect the attacks were carried out by "religiously intolerant Hindus" in order to form a "Hindu Nation."

The pastors shared this view even though they had not spoken to one another. Christian leaders also shared the view that the sudden rise in attacks against Christians is in one way or another influenced by the recent rise of anti-Christian policies and hostilities in India.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Nepal on May 11 and 12.

Subedi of the RLFN said Christian leaders have appealed for help from the government.

"We have written to the Nepalese government to help us rebuild our churches and asked them to not discriminate us on the basis of religion," he told Morning Star News. "We look towards them as our guardians and not as our enemy."

### **Christians Arrested**

At the same time, six Christians are under police custody in Tehrathum District, eastern Nepal, under allegations of evangelizing.

On May 9 two of them were arrested while singing worship songs on the street and allegedly proclaiming Christ, while four were arrested at their homes, Subedi said. They

appeared in court on Thursday (May 17), when their remand to jail was extended for seven more days.

Arrested were Dinesh Subba, 28, Ashish Subba, 22, Dipak Subba, 28, Manatula Dhital, 44, all from Jhapa. Also arrested were two visiting from India – 40-year-old Barshiya Dhital of Sikkim, and Pawan Rai, 33, from Paschim Bangal.

Evangelizing is prohibited under Nepal's new constitution, passed in September 2015, as it was under the previous constitution. While the new constitution establishes Nepal as a secular and democratic republic, its definition of "secular" appears to protect Hinduism and allows others only to worship in their own faiths. Article 26 forbids anyone to "convert a person of one religion to another religion, or disturb the religion of other people."

While evangelizing has long been illegal in Nepal, advocacy groups have recently detected increased enforcement and other anti-Christian efforts as officials seek to placate Hindus incensed that the new constitution did not re-establish a more prominent place for Hinduism.

A landlocked country between the giants of India and China, Nepal is said to be more than 75 percent Hindu and 16 percent Buddhist. Christians are estimated to make up nearly 3 percent of Nepal's population, and Muslims 4.4 percent.

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## **Catholic church set on fire**

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (09.05.2018) - St Joseph's Catholic Church in Kohalpur, Banke District in Nepal was set on fire at around 1am on 5 May by unidentified arsonists.

Local sources have informed CSW that people living in the vicinity of the church were told by the perpetrators to go into their homes and not to come out. Witnesses said that between eight and ten unidentified men then broke into the church, splashed petrol around it and set the church ablaze.

St Joseph's church is a new parish with an estimated 20 parishioners. No one was injured in the arson attack, but the interior of the church has been entirely destroyed; only the outer structure remains standing.

The Federation of National Christians in Nepal (FNCN) issued a press statement demanding a response from the government of Nepal and a prompt investigation to bring the perpetrators to justice. The FNCN condemned the 'inhuman act' as a direct assault on religious minorities in Nepal, and one that would 'disturb mutual harmony'. The statement also pointed out that the government must champion the basic fundamental freedoms enshrined in the constitution and guarantee that all human rights are protected. The FNCN also called on the government to protect the interests of Christians so that they may feel safe to practise their religion.

Prakash Kadhka, a human rights defender in Kathmandu, said: "The heinous act of desecrating a holy place is a direct attack on the Catholic Church. The sanctuary, altar and the Eucharist are central to our worship. This hateful act is cowardly and send out an uneasy message [sic] that Christianity is not welcomed in this place. We are keen to build peace and work towards justice. Acts that provoke a culture of hate and fear will not bring about lasting peace and durable solutions."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: "We are deeply concerned and saddened by the arson attack on St Joseph's Church, a place of worship and one where people gather

to seek refuge, comfort and relief. As a newly appointed member of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Nepal has pledged to promote human rights in Nepal and around the world, including freedom of religion or belief. We urge the government of Nepal to uphold its commitments and to ensure a thorough, swift investigation into this case and the prosecution of those responsible for this attack.”

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