

INDIA: Thousands protest jailing of Christians who were accused of offering money to convert villagers in India

By Jardine Malado

The Christian Times (29.09.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2khpsEC> – Around 5,000 Christians gathered on the streets in India's Jharkhand state on Monday to protest the jailing of six Pentecostals who were accused of offering money to villagers to convert them to Christianity.

Five men and one woman were arrested from Tukupani village in Simdega district following a complaint from the village chief that some people were offering money to indigenous people to become Christians, according to UCA News.

The ecumenical "silent protest" that took place on Sept. 25 was organized after a local court rejected the bail application of the six Pentecostals on Sept. 21.

"We wanted them to be released because they are innocent people who gathered for a prayer," said Gladson Dungdung, a Catholic leader, who was one of the organizers of the protest.

Dungdung asserted that the district court rejected the bail "seemingly under pressure from higher ups," adding that the protesters will be appealing to a higher court.

The six Christians were charged with upsetting the religious feelings of others, according to district police chief Rajiv Ranjan Singh.

Bishop Vincent Barwa of Simdega expressed concern that an “atmosphere of suspicion” began to emerge in the state following the passage of the anti-conversion law on Aug. 12. He lamented that in several areas, Hindu groups “act as if they have a mandate to keep a check on others, especially Christians.”

The new legislation prohibits conversion through force or allurement or fraudulent means, and it stipulates that those who want to convert to another religion should seek permission from the government. Those who were found to be in violation of the law could be jailed for three years and fined 50,000 rupees (US\$800).

The police officer noted that the six Christians were not booked under the provisions of the anti-conversion law, which is still not enforced as the government has not framed the necessary rules for the law to take effect.

Dungdung, however, contended that the arrest sends a “clear message that the new anti-conversion law will be used as a tool to check the activities of some people and groups. Christians will have a tough time ahead.”

While India’s national constitution guarantees freedom of religion, anti-conversion laws are currently in effect in six states, namely Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Himachal Pradesh.

The ruling Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has claimed that the tribal population of Jharkhand has been targeted by missionaries, noting that the Christian percentage of the tribal people has increased by nearly 30 percent since the last census.

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