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Murders of religious minorities in India go unpunished, report finds

By Kai Schultz

The New York Times (18.02.2019) - <https://nyti.ms/2GCib8a> - New Delhi: The Indian authorities have delayed investigating a wave of vigilante-style murders of religious minorities, with many instead working to justify the attacks or file charges against some of the victims' families, according to a report released Tuesday by Human Rights Watch.

The 104-page report said that since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's governing Bharatiya Janata Party took power in 2014, attacks led by so-called cow protection groups have jumped sharply.

Between May 2015 and December 2018, at least 44 people have been killed, Human Rights Watch found. Most of the victims were Muslims accused of storing beef or transporting cows for slaughter, a crime in most Indian states. Many Hindus, who form about 80 percent of India's population, consider cows sacred.

Data cited in the report from FactChecker.in, an Indian organization that tracks reports of violence, found that as many as 90 percent of religion-based hate crimes in the last decade occurred after Mr. Modi took office. Mobs hung victims from trees, frequently mutilated victims and burned bodies.

In almost all of these attacks, victims' families faced significant pushback when they pressed for justice. The police "initially stalled investigations, ignored procedures, or even played a complicit role in the killings and cover-up of crimes," the report said.

"Indian police investigations into mob attacks are almost as likely to accuse the minority victims of a crime as they are to pursue vigilantes with government connections," said Meenakshi Ganguly, the South Asia director of Human Rights Watch.

Released ahead of national elections this April and May, the report, called "Violent Cow Protection in India: Vigilante Groups Attack Minorities," also looks at the government's response to 11 recent attacks that killed 14 people.

According to a survey from NDTV cited by Human Rights Watch, "communally divisive language" in speeches by elected officials shot up nearly 500 percent between 2014 and 2018, compared with the five years before the B.J.P. came to power. Ninety percent of those speeches were from the B.J.P., which has ties to far-right Hindu nationalist groups.

"We will hang those who kill cows," Raman Singh, a member of the B.J.P. and the former chief minister of Chhattisgarh state, said in 2017.

The report said this sort of rhetoric, paired with the profusion of stricter cow protection laws, had emboldened mob attacks. They included assaults of Muslim men and women in trains; the stripping and beating of lower-caste Dalits in western India; the force-feeding

of cow dung and urine to two men in northern India; the rape of two women and the killing of two men in the state of Haryana for allegedly eating beef at home.

Some of the attacks were filmed, suggesting that the mobs did not fear retribution for their actions, said Harsh Mander, an Indian social worker and writer.

"You won't put your face on video committing a crime if you're bothered about being punished," he said. "You're assured that you'll be protected and treated like a hero."

Last year, India's Supreme Court introduced "preventive, remedial and punitive" measures to stem mob violence, noting that false rumors spread on messaging applications like WhatsApp had worsened the problem. And in August, after a long silence, Mr. Modi spoke out against the attacks, saying, "I want to make it clear that mob lynching is a crime, no matter the motive."

But Mr. Mander said these denouncements were too soft. And he added that changing a culture of "fear" among minorities would take much more than just voting the B.J.P. out of power.

"They've created an enabling and supportive environment for people to act out their hate," he said of the government. "Once you let the genie out of the bottle, it's not going to obey you and just go back in."

Chhattisgarh, Hindu radicals attack a Pentecostal church

The incident occurred during the prayer service. The attackers beat the faithful gathered to hear the Sunday sermon. Some musical instruments destroyed; three copies of the Bible ripped.

By Nirmala Carvalho

AsiaNews (28.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2G7suVc> - A group of radical Hindus attacked a Pentecostal church in Chhattisgarh. The incident occurred yesterday during Sunday prayers, according to Sajan K George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christian (GCIC), who "strongly condemns the attack on the Pentecostal church".

The Christian leader reports: "Yesterday around 9.30 am, the Rev. Ajay Ravi was preaching at a meeting of about 25 people. Suddenly, without any provocation, 15 people stormed the church, while others waited outside. The attackers were shouting that the people gathered in prayer were insulting the gods and goddesses [Hindu]".

Later the interruption of the prayer service degenerated into real violence. The radicals, continues Sajan K George, "beat up the faithful, insulted the women. Then they ripped three copies of the Bible, broke some musical instruments and destroyed a motorcycle. "

The attack took place the day following the 70th anniversary of the Republic. According to the president of the GCIC, "it is a shame. Religious freedom is guaranteed by the

Constitution. This attack intimidates the vulnerable Christian community, [and spreads] fear and insecurity, above all because of the anti-conversion law in force in the State ".