

Kandhamal Christians struggling after carnage

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Borimunda, India, February 10 (ENInews) – Junos Nayak's family owns more than ten acres of land in Gadaguda, a village in the Kandhamal district in eastern India, but his turmeric and rice fields have remained barren for the last two years.

"Our land was cultivated by Hindus (on lease basis). But now they are forbidden from working on our land," Nayak told ENInews. The prohibition is part of a continuing struggle for Christians in Kandhamal since anti-Christian violence that began in August 2008 killed more than 90 people. Junos Nayak's elder brother, Lalji Nayak, was among those killed.

"We thought that after the violence, things would be normal. But we are being suffocated at different levels. We are now forbidden from even drawing water from the village well. We had to dig our own well," said Nayak, who belongs to the Protestant Church of North India. He survived the 2008 rampage, but carries two dozen gun pellets in his hand.

The violence followed the murder of Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati, a Hindu leader who had been leading a campaign against Christianity in Kandhamal. About 18 percent of the population of 650,000 is Christian, compared to the national average of 2.3 percent. Though "Maoist rebels" claimed responsibility for the murder, Hindu groups alleged that the murder was a Christian conspiracy.

More than 300 churches and 6,000 Christian houses were also looted and burned, rendering nearly half of the Christian population homeless. Since he owns land, Junos Nayak is financially better off than most Christians in Kandhamal and was recently able to return and repair his burned house.

"A major impact of the violence is the marginalization of the vibrant Christian community in Kandhamal," acknowledged Paul Pradhan, a Catholic social activist. "A

concerted effort is going on in Kandhamal to isolate and marginalize the Christians," said Pradhan who had been running a social action network called Rural Beautification and People's Service Council.

Despite having a majority of Hindus on his staff, Pradhan's office complex and residence were destroyed. "Sadly, our community has been scattered due to the carnage. Many of the youth and the richer people have not returned to Kandhamal. In several families (in Kandhamal), only the old people are there," noted Pradhan.

At least 6,000 Christians, Pradhan said, have settled in Bhubaneswar, the capital of Orissa state, while many Christians have left for other urban centres in search of jobs to support parents struggling to rebuild their houses in Kandhamal.

Bajilo Digal and his wife Debanti have virtually given up thoughts of returning to their Gamarikia village. "We have no land in the village and our house has been destroyed. If we go back, how could we survive there?" asked Digal, who has settled in the Saliashi slum in Bhubaneswar and works as a shop sweeper.

Saying that Hindus continue to tell Christians to forsake their faith to live peacefully in Kandhamal, Digal said that "it is better to live here and practice our faith freely."

Vikram Nayak of Borimunda village, a teacher and Pentecostal church member, confirmed that "those who have money and connections outside (Kandhamal) have left. They do not want to suffer the harassment and continued intimidation." When asked about an abandoned large house under construction that is surrounded by rows of damaged Christian houses, Nayak said, "The owner is not here. He has fled Kandhamal." After two and half years, he said, none of the six dozen Christian houses destroyed in the village had been repaired.

"There is a ban on Hindus from carrying building material for Christians in their vehicles. How could we bring building material in such a situation?" asked Naveen Chandra Nayak, a retired soldier who now lives in his brother's partially damaged house.

"We are telling our people to rebuild their houses in their villages. Otherwise, they will lose their links with this land," said Fr. Bijay Kumar Pradhan (no relation to Paul Pradhan), vicar general for the Roman Catholics of Kandhamal. More than half of the 117,000 Christians in the region belong to the Catholic church.

"The devastation has been extensive and we have a long way to go," said Fr. Pradhan, who coordinates a Catholic church relief program that has helped rebuild more than 2,200 houses and provides assistance to needy Christians.