

India rejects U.S. religious freedom report

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NEW DELHI (RNS) India is rejecting a U.S. panel's charges that the religious freedom of minorities in the world's largest democracy is being violated with tacit support from elements in the ruling party.

By contrast, leaders of the country's Christian and Muslim minorities welcomed the findings of the report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, released on May 2 in Washington.

In New Delhi, Vikas Swarup, a foreign ministry spokesman, said the report "fails to show proper understanding of India, its constitution, and its society."

"India is a vibrant pluralistic society founded on strong democratic principles," Swarup said. "The Indian Constitution guarantees fundamental rights to all its citizens, including the right to freedom of religion."

The USCIRF report deems India to be "on a negative trajectory," with increasing activities against minorities by Hindu groups that it says are "tacitly supported" by a segment of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party.

The report mentions a ban on cow slaughter in some states, forced conversions by Hindu groups and problems of police bias and judicial inaction. They "have created a pervasive climate of impunity, where religious minority communities feel increasingly insecure, with no recourse when religiously-motivated crimes occur."

Last month, police arrested five suspects in the hanging deaths of two Muslim cowherds in an incident that led to violent protests in the eastern state of Jharkhand amid reports the attackers were Hindu vigilantes.

USCIRF designated India as a Tier 2 country—not among the worst offenders, rather a “country of particular concern”—and called on the Indian government to “publicly rebuke government officials and religious leaders” who make “derogatory statements about religious communities.”

Christian and Muslim leaders say religious freedoms are indeed being violated.

Maulana Salim Engineer, secretary-general of Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, the country’s largest Islamic organization, said the government is encouraging Hindu extremist groups by rejecting the report.

“These fascist elements are trying to demolish the pluralistic structure of secular India; by not acting against these fascist elements and rejecting the USCIRF report the government is destabilizing the foundation of Indian democracy and tarnishing the country’s image internationally,” he told said. “The Indian government should take corrective actions instead of denying the truth revealed by this US Commission report.”

The situation for Christians has been aggravated because six Indian states have laws that criminalize evangelism and put extraordinary restrictions on conversions, said John Dayal, spokesman of the United Christian Forum. He criticized the government for rejecting international scrutiny of its human rights record.

The USCIRF is a bipartisan commission that can make policy recommendations but has no direct legislative authority.

Last month, chairman Robert P. George said commission members had been unable to obtain visas for members who planned to travel to India to assess conditions there.