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October 24, 1990

90-146

NOTE TO EDITORS: Asia correspondent Michael Chute, who just returned to his Hong Kong base after a coverage trip to India, wrote the following two stories about religious tensions in that nation.

Hindu persecution of Christians
intensifies in eastern India

By Michael Chute

N-FMS

BHUBANESWAR, India (BP)--Christians in eastern India have reported violent attacks on church workers and buildings in a fresh round of religious persecution by radical Hindus.

However, Christian leaders said rumors that an evangelist was beheaded are unfounded.

Many of the 280 Baptist churches in the Khond Hills near Bhubaneswar, in the state of Orissa, have come under increasingly violent attacks in recent months from the radical Hindu group called Rastriya Sebek Sayand Sangha (RSS).

RSS instigators have beaten church workers and burned churches, many of them Baptist. Also, local Hindu authorities have imprisoned some Baptists for their Christian beliefs.

Southern Baptist funds recently replaced roofs of a number of Baptist churches burned in the attacks. Southern Baptists also provide matching grants to help fund church planters working in the Khond Hills.

"We are now looking at putting in windows and doors" of the churches, said Satyananda Patra, vice president of the Baptist Union of India.

The RSS religious/political organization vows to oust all Christians and Muslims from India. It insists the country belongs only to Hindus, although about 100 million Muslims and 26 million Christians live throughout India.

Recently two church leaders, Srikand Digal and Simon Nayak, were attacked while doing evangelistic work in a Khond Hills village.

"One was shot and the other was hacked but they were not killed," said Daniel James, secretary of the Orissa Baptist Evangelistic Crusade, which works with churches in the Khond Hills.

Earlier, a mob of fanatical Hindus assaulted two Baptist leaders, Sushanta Naik and Paul Pradhan. Naik is an evangelist working in the region and Pradhan is secretary of the Khond Hills Baptist Church Union.

"They went to see about a church that was destroyed," said Patra. "When they were returning through another village a large group of Hindus surrounded their motorcycle and attacked them. They wanted to kill them but they somehow escaped. God spared these lives."

The motorcycle, also donated by Southern Baptists, was badly damaged.

Hindu persecution of Christians in Orissa state began in 1970 when RSS radicals burned Barhampur Baptist Church. After protests from Christians around the world, the Indian government rebuilt it. But violence began again two years ago when Hindus burned 15 Protestant and Catholic churches in Orissa.

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The latest violence began after RSS leader Laxman Saraswati exhorted followers to put Hindu gods on carts and push them through village streets.

Eyewitnesses said Christians were dragged from their homes and told to bow down and worship the idols. When they refused the Hindus beat them, then destroyed their houses and churches.

Saraswati reportedly said that in two years his group would drive all Christians out of the Khond Hills. However, Baptist work continues to grow in the area; 500 new believers are baptized every year.

"Our people have taken that challenge," said James. "They (Christians) say that by the year 2000 we'll win all of the Khond Hills to the Lord."

Baptist leaders said Hindus in northeast India fear Orissa will become like Nagaland, an Indian state that registers a 95 percent Christian population.

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Temple dispute could cause
Hindu-Muslim religious war

By Michael Chute

N-FMB

Baptist Press
10/24/90

DELHI, India (BP)--Increasing tensions between Hindus and Muslims threaten to erupt into religious war in India, even as the government has acquired a disputed temple site in a last-minute bid to head off confrontation.

Hindus consider Ayodhya, the temple site in Uttar Pradesh state, as the birthplace of Lord Rama, a mythological hero they believe is an incarnation of their god Vishnu. They contend that 450 years ago Muslims destroyed the Ram Janmabhoomi temple on the site, a popular place of Hindu pilgrimage, and built the present-day Babri Masjid mosque there.

Hindu fundamentalists set Oct. 30 as the deadline for Muslims to vacate the disputed temple land. On that date, Hindus pledge to destroy the mosque and rebuild the Ram Janmabhoomi temple.

The government not only acquired the land, which was being legally disputed before the Allahabad high court, but shifted the case to India's Supreme Court for "expeditious disposal." The government action proposed a "status quo" for the disputed site and also took over land adjoining the area.

But both Hindu and Muslim communities contend the controversy has not been solved. The government's decision is not supported by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), or the Muslim's All-India Babri Masjid Action Committee.

In a related development, the 10-month-old National Front government of Indian Prime Minister V.P. Singh apparently lost its parliamentary majority Oct. 23 after the Hindu BJP withdrew support. The Indian government arrested BJP President L.K. Advani that day and stopped, at least temporarily, his 6,000-mile "rathayatra" or procession across north India to the disputed temple site.

At whistle stops along the route, Advani reiterated that reconstruction of the Hindu temple remained the only acceptable solution to the controversy. The procession picked up thousands of temple-building volunteers along the way and organizers expect as many as 500,000 Hindus in Ayodhya on Oct. 30.

But Prime Minister Singh assured Muslim leaders that the Babri Masjid mosque would not be damaged under any circumstances.

Before Advani's arrest, Indian Muslim leader Syed Bukhari told a press conference in Delhi that the All-India Babri Masjid Action Committee had postponed plans to stop the BJP's procession following Singh's assurances. But if tensions continue to escalate, he warned, the committee will call Muslims from among India's 100-million strong Muslim community to stop the Hindu march.

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"Those who have declared war against us should not think that we are weak," he said. "We can stop the (procession) if we want, but we are avoiding such a step because we do not want any bloodshed."

The procession threatened to plunge the country into religious war, not only in Ayodhya but at other religious sites to which both Muslims and Hindus lay claim. Already the march has prompted communal violence between Muslims and Hindus everywhere it has gone.

Government, Muslim and moderate Hindu leaders called the procession "unfortunate," coming at a time when India's political atmosphere already was overcharged with communal and caste passions. In recent weeks the country has been plunged into controversy over reserving 27 percent of government jobs for lower castes, or social classes.

Advani maintained the procession's aim was to "promote national unity." But it has opened festering religious passions in the seven states it has passed through. Communal violence has claimed more than 100 lives since the procession left Somnath temple in Gujarat state Sept. 25.

BJP leaders insist other Indian political parties oppose construction of the Hindu temple because they want to retain Muslim votes. They charge Hindus have been denied their rights and should fight against appeasement of Indian minorities.

"Everyone's become a Hindu," said one BJP supporter as Advani's procession vehicle, a Toyota van outfitted to look like a chariot, entered Delhi Oct. 18. "The temple is as good as made."

Hundreds of BJP, VHP and fundamentalist Hindu volunteers were arrested along the procession's route in efforts to head off violence. Authorities confiscated films about the temple dispute. Police also used tear gas to dispel riots in many cities, which were subsequently put under curfew. In some cases state government leaders even called out the army to control clashes between Hindu and Muslim communities.

Indian historian Bipin Chandra alleges the Ayodhya temple dispute was "deliberately searched out as an issue to marry religion and communalism and rouse the masses. Communalism (a struggle for ethnic and religious supremacy) has entered the bloodstream of the Indian people ... but we do not need instant diagnosis of treatment by quacks. We need farsightedness and tolerance. I would not hesitate to describe (Bukhari and Advani) as communal leaders."

Chandra, a professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, noted that similar processions surrounding the Ayodhya temple in 1984 did not bring controversy. Also, no action was taken in 1986 on the Archaeological Survey of India's proposal that the disputed site be declared a protected monument. But Chandra added that Hindu discontent continued to simmer until last year.

BJP Vice President Sikandar Bakht insists the political organization doesn't want to demolish the existing Muslim mosque but to "respectfully" shift it to another site. He said such a plan doesn't violate Islamic principles, citing numerous examples of mosques being shifted in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and most recently in Pakistan.

Advani also claims that no Muslim rituals had been offered at the Ayodhya mosque since 1936 and that Hindu idols placed there in 1949 have been worshiped since that time. For all practical purposes, he asserted, the site was not a mosque at all, but a Hindu temple.

Also, the Hindu temple construction committee would "consider the construction of a temple encasing the structure of the Babri Masjid instead of dismantling the mosque which would hurt Muslim sentiments," said committee chairman Mahant Avaidyanath.

Noting some people have suggested converting the disputed Ayodhya sight into a national monument Avaidyanath insists such a plan would be "a monument to slavery," since the mosque was built by Babur, a Muslim invader of India.

CORRECTION:

In the (BP) release dated 10/17/90, first paragraph, Robert L. Cate will be the Phoebe Schertz Young professor of religion at Oklahoma State University.

The paragraph should read:

MILL VALLEY, Calif. (BP)--Robert L. Cate, dean of academic affairs at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary since 1984, has resigned to become the Phoebe Schertz Young professor of religion at Oklahoma State University, effective Jan. 31, 1991.

Thank you,
Baptist Press

Baptist workers face new strains
in Israel, occupied territories

By David Smith

N-FMB

Baptist Press
10/24/90

PETAH TIQVA, Israel (BP)--Southern Baptist representatives in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza are adapting to changing circumstances, including Iraqi threats of chemical warfare and increasing anti-Americanism.

"People are nervous about the situation, although no ministries have been curtailed," said Tom Hocutt of Birmingham, Ala., administrator of the Baptist Convention in Israel. Families with children are under the most strain, he said. Nearly 50 Southern Baptist representatives currently work in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank.

Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein has repeatedly threatened to attack Israel with chemical weapons if Iraq or Kuwait are invaded by the international forces now massed in Saudi Arabia. Much of the Israeli population is obtaining gas masks to prepare for the threat. Meanwhile, violence between Palestinians and Jews in Israel -- and Palestinian anger over U.S. actions in the Middle East -- are rising.

Sonny Rogerson of Georgetown, S.C., a Southern Baptist representative who works with the West Bank Baptist Society, said he keeps track of his family members at all times. So does Connie Anthony, who works in Jerusalem.

Anthony's greatest fear is that her husband, John, would be at work, the children at school and "me at home" when a crisis occurred. "The worst-case scenario for us is for the family to be separated," she said. The Anthonys are from Mount Ida and Hope, Ark.

Rogerson has had to reschedule many ministry activities.

"I have to be real careful where I go and when, since I've been hit by rocks or bottles five times in the last month," he reported. "I try to drive a beat-up van to avoid being targeted by stone throwers. I try to look at what's ahead whenever I go anywhere to see if there's any group or confrontation. I also try to keep up with the news to see if trouble is brewing so I won't put myself or the family in danger.

"The situation is the same as it's been for three years (since the beginning of the Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories), but now it's more intense and brutal," Rogerson added.

Jack Hodges of Hildebran, N.C., works in Gaza. "Over the last three years we've learned to deal with a lot of new things, and I think that's given us some ability to deal more objectively with these new threats," he said.

Among the new threats are anti-American remarks and vandalism against Baptist institutions committed by Palestinian youths, as well as an increase in stone throwing.

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"We're revamping our contingency plans. We realize things could escalate and we might need to get out. The worst thing is that we might have to leave," Hodges said.

"Saddam Hussein has changed things," added Rogerson, who sees a resurgence in Arabism and Arab pride. Rogerson is concerned about a possible regional war in which Arabs would see America as an aggressor, followed by a Palestinian venting of anger against all things American.

"Some Palestinian Muslim friends have told me if there's war I shouldn't show my face," he said.

Some foreign businesses have ordered their employees to leave Israel, but Southern Baptist representatives in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza have not yet exercised that option. Each Southern Baptist family can choose to leave at any time, however.

"The only thing that keeps me here is that God has not directed me anywhere else," Rogerson concluded. "There's no indication that it's time for me to leave or that this is not where he wants me, even if it means death. It's better for me to die in his will than to live outside of his will."

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Smith is press representative for Southern Baptist workers in Israel.

(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the Foreign Mission Board bureau of Baptist Press

Students surround convention,
demand help for seminary

N-EMB

Baptist Press
10/24/90

SEOUL, South Korea (BP)--Students of the independent Capital Seminary surrounded the building where messengers to the Korea Baptist Convention were meeting and refused to let them out for 12 hours.

The students picketed the entire convention meeting, demanding that the convention assume some responsibility for the seminary. On Oct. 1, when the convention was to complete its business at noon, students kept messengers hemmed in until midnight, when the convention chairman and executive secretary promised to negotiate the matter.

Capital Seminary, which has always been outside of the convention, was started by Billy Kim, a well-known Korean Baptist evangelist. As graduates have taken positions in Baptist convention churches, the seminary's influence within the convention has grown. It is located just outside Seoul.

Korean Baptists' official seminary is the Korea Baptist Theological Seminary in Taejon, which has more than 1,500 students and now offers degrees on the master of divinity level.

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