

Letter to Parliament about the EU-delegation that investigates the situation of victims of Hindu-extremist violence in Kandhamal, Orissa

Letter to Parliament | 8 March 2010

Hereby I present you the answers to written questions raised by the members Voordewind, Van der Staay and Haverkamp to the EU-delegation that investigates the the situation of victims of Hindu-extremist violence in Kandhamal, Orissa. These questions were forwarded on 8 February 2010 with index nr. 2010Z02408

The Minister of Foreign Affairs,

Drs. M.J.M. Verhagen

Questions of the Members Voordewind (ChristianUnion), Van der Staay (SGP) and Haverkamp (CDA) to the Minister of Foreign Affairs about the EU delegation investigating the situation of victims of hindu-extremist violence in Kandhamal, Orissa (submitted 8 February 2010)

1. Are you aware of reports that the EU delegation who was supposed to investigate the situation of victims of Hindu-extremist violence in Kandhamal, Orissa¹, after first having been refused to visit the Kandhamal district and being refused again end of January to visit that district, will now visit Kandhamal in Orissa between the 2nd and 5th of February?
2. What is your assessment about this course of affairs and more specifically the fact that this EU delegation has a very limited mandate and is not allowed to do any fact-finding regarding the situation of Christian refugees in the state of Orissa² after the violence against them resulting in dozens of lives lost?

Answer

Yes these reports are known to me. The delay of the EU-mission had safety and logistic reasons and could finally take place with co-operation of the Indian authorities in a form that the EU wished. The EU mission was a follow-up of the mission in December 2008 and had a broad mandate. The members of the mission had meetings in Bhubaneshwar (de capital of Orissa), in Cuttack (where the Directorate General of the Orissa police holds office) and visited the district of Kandhamal where villages hit most severely by communal violence were visited. Meetings took place with the DG of Police, a representative of the Orissa state government, the Archbishop of Bhubaneshwar and Cuttack, various church organizations, human rights organizations, local journalists and victims of violence.

3. Are you familiar with the report³ that on the eve of the visit of the EU-delegation, Christian refugees have been ousted from their shelter camps? If this is true, which steps have been taken towards the Indian government to make sure that these refugees will still be adequately taken care of?

¹ Proceedings of Parliament, Year 2009-2010, nr. 189

² See Press Trust of India: http://www.ptinews.com/news/489996_Orissa-allows-Eu-delegation-to-visit-Kandhamal

³ See e.g. Nederlands Dagblad (Dutch Daily Newspaper), 21st of January 2010

Answer

This relates to a report on the village Hakpotha in the G. Udayagir sub-district of the Kandhamal district where 15 families were ousted from a government building a few days before the arrival of the EU mission. They stayed there since 2008 and were asked to return to their village. These families all got financial compensation to rebuild their houses. Despite the fact that many other families from the same village had returned, these families stayed behind because they felt intimidated by the perpetrators of the violence which had been released on bail. The EU mission visited these families and urged for adequate police protection in order to be able to safely return home.

4. What is your assessment of the announced measures to restore justice via the “fast track courts” which were specifically established to try in court the perpetrators of the violence against Christians, also taking into consideration the letter of the ‘Association of Victims of Kandhamal Communal Violence’ to the Chief Justice of the Orissa High Court, which states that victims are being threatened, that there are shoddy police investigations and, more generally, that there is ‘gross miscarriage of justice’ in the fast-track courts?
5. What is your assessment about the rehabilitation of the victims of the violence, including the “40.000 Christians” that, according to your answers on November 18th, “have been on the run for religious violence”, also taking into account the contention by the above-mentioned AVKV that the rehabilitation and compensation of the victims is either not sufficient or has not reached them at all?

Answer

It is an important signal for the Christian community in Orissa that the Indian government has taken measures to track and bring to trial the accused of the violence in 2008 and to compensate and rehabilitate the victims. I am also aware about the reports of victims that are of the opinion that the measures taken are insufficient. The recent EU-mission has investigated the justice restoring measures. On this issue I will wait for the report of the mission.

6. What has been the nature of the Dutch support so far and what has been achieved with the Dutch input for the victims of the violence, for the possible returning home of the displaced victims and for the normalisation of the relations?

Answer

The Netherlands has actively participated in the two EU-missions to Orissa to investigate the situation of the Christians. These missions have attracted a lot of (media) attention in India and show the importance that the EU, including The Netherlands, attach to ending the violence in Orissa as well as justice restoring measures.

In addition and co-initiated by The Netherlands, the issue violence against religious minorities was discussed during the local EU-India human rights dialogue. Also the situation in Orissa was brought up. In 2010 the topic will again be put on the agenda of the EU-India dialogue.

The Netherlands also finances a project in India to give access to justice to victims of religious violence. The reason for this project was, among others, the violence against Christians in Orissa in 2008. The Indian NGO Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (in co-operation with the organization Multiple Action Resource Group) implemented the project.

7. What is your assessment of the claims of, among others, the AVKV, that not only Hindu-extremists but also government officials tend to blame the violence on conflicts between Scheduled Castes (‘Dalits’) and Scheduled Tribes (‘Adivasi’) in order to distract the attention from the activities of these same Hindu-extremists?

Answer

The starting point has to be that those responsible for the violence are being tracked and punished, independent of their religious or tribal background.

As I stated in my earlier answers to questions regarding the violence against Christians in Orissa (28 December 2008 and 29 September 2009), the tensions are only partly related to religion and are co-determined by complex socio-economic and ethnic factors, in which the ownership of land plays an important role. These factors do influence the risk of mutual conflicts between groups of Hindus and Christians (often converted Dalits).

8. Can you inform the Parliament after the visit of the EU delegation about their findings and the way The Netherlands will be involved in their follow-up?

Answer

Yes. I will inform you about it.