

PETITION CALLING FOR THE IMMEDIATE RELEASE OF SEVEN WRONGFULLY IMPRISONED CHRISTIANS

Ambassador Navtej Sarna
Embassy of India
2107 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20008

February 2, 2018

Dear Ambassador Sarna,

It is with great concern that we petition your government for a speedy appeal of seven Christian individuals falsely accused, arrested and held for almost ten years in Odisha.

The accused, which include Messrs. Bijay Kumar Sanseth, Gornath Chalanseth, Budhadeb Nayak, Bhaskar Sunamajhi, Durjo Sunamajhi, Munda Badmajhi and Sanatan Badmajhi, were all indicted by authorities in the Kandhamal District of Orissa for alleged complicity in the 2008 killing of Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, a Hindu religious and political leader. Swami Saraswati was killed along with four others on the 23rd of August, 2008, in a raid by an estimated thirty armed assailants, setting off a series of violent, anti-Christian protests in which 38 people were murdered and 54,000 left homeless. In addition, 300 churches and 6,000 homes were destroyed.

However, on September 9th, the Communist Party of India (also known as the Naxalites) claimed full responsibility, providing strong evidence that the seven accused Christians were innocent. In 2009, members of the Naxalites were arrested and formally charged with committing the same crime. At least one High Court ruled there lacked material evidence against the seven Christians and ordered the "Fast-Track Court #2" in Phulbani to conclude the trial in a "speedy manner." In October of 2013, the men were convicted by trial and sentenced to life imprisonment.

In addition, ICC believes there is strong evidence to suggest that the seven prisoners remain in detention simply for political motives, including the fear that their release will spark a backlash from radical Hindu groups in the region.

Mr. Ambassador, the signers of this petition urge you in the strongest possible terms to apply immediate pressure on the appropriate authorities in Odisha to bring the appeal of these seven individuals to a swift and just conclusion. All seven individuals have wives and children who have been left to pay for their legal support, as well as provide for themselves, as their fathers and husbands reside in prison for a crime they did not commit. Sectarian prejudice, and religiously-based discrimination, should not be allowed to dictate the fate of seven innocent men. Their release will help signal to the world that India is sincere both in its application of the rule of law and the promotion of religious freedom for all of its 1.2 billion citizens.

Sincerely,

International Christian Concern (and attached)

CC:
Secretary of State Rex Tillerson
Senator Bob Corker, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Senator Ben Cardin, Ranking Democratic Member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Congressman Ed Royce, Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Congressman Eliot Engel, Ranking Democratic Member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs

