

## Priests visit anti-Christian riot-hit Indian villages



Priests from several parts of India have visited villagers in Odisha state to learn how they coped with anti-Christian violence.

Coming from seven dioceses in northeastern India, 32 of them visited villages in eastern Kandhamal district where violence in 2007-2008 resulted in the murder of about 100 Christians who refused to abandon their faith. The regional Odisha bishops' council organized the visit, the first in a series. This group of priests are involved in the spiritual and academic formation of seminarians.

"The Catholics of Kandhamal may not pass a catechism examination or win a prize at a catechism quiz but they came out with flying colors in the ultimate test of their faith," said Bishop John Thomas Kattrukudiyil of Itanagar, who led the group. "Faith is more important than knowledge," he said.

During the week-long tour that began Oct. 23 they visited riot-affected families and spoke to survivors. The priests stayed with the families overnight. Afterwards they discussed their experiences, guided by Bishop Franco Mulakkal of Jalandhar. They met "the valiant Christians of Kandhamal who did not hesitate to sacrifice everything for the sake of their Catholic faith," Bishop Kattrukudiyil said. Kandhamal, the hilly tribal district in eastern India has witnessed several incidents of anti-Christian violence in the past two decades. The worst began in August 2008 and lasted seven weeks during which marauding crowds of Hindu extremists murdered Christians, destroyed churches and convents,

set fire to Christian homes and institutions and raped nuns, in what came to be known as the largest persecution of Christians in modern Indian history.

Father Philip Barla from Tezpur said the "most affecting experience" was to know that "such intense and fanatical violence failed to have any impact on the faith of the poor Christians. The perpetrators of the violence may have hoped to wipe Christianity from the region but they failed; the torture only strengthened people's faith," he said.

Father Paul Dahanga also from Tezpur admired the villagers' bravery. "They continue to be surrounded by people who question and challenge their faith. They live under constant threat. But they hold on to their faith in Christ," he said.

Father Sebastian Ekka from Dibrugarh told ucanews.com that the "resilience shown by the Christians of Kandhamal proved that the allegation that they were lured or tricked into their faith with material incentives was false."

Archbishop John Barwa of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar, whose archdiocese covers the riot-hit area, told ucanews.com that such visits help local Christians experience the universal church's concern for them.

Purushottam Nayak,- UCAnes