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INDIA | Compensation Awarded to Kandhamal Victims

The Delhi High Court has awarded enhanced compensation to 14 Christians who were victims of targeted attacks in Kandhamal in 2008, in a step that has been welcomed as evidence of the judiciary's commitment to protecting freedom of religion or belief in India.

The enhanced compensation, which amounts to about \$2,286,986, was awarded May 4. Human rights lawyer Tehmina Arora, who led the litigation, stated that this outcome reflected the judiciary's commitment to protecting the right to freedom of religion in the country.

In 2008, the Christian community in Kandhamal was attacked by hardline Hindu nationalists affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which espouses Hindutva ideology. Over 90 people were killed, at least 54,000 displaced and over 300 churches destroyed. According to local sources, although over 3,300 complaints were made to the police, only 727 cases went to trial in fast-track courts, where 88.6% of the accused were acquitted.

A.C Michael, the Consulting Director of ADF (India), said, "This is a modest headway in light huge numbers who have been displaced. The latent injustice, which have been prevalent for so long is still a long way from being solved for the victims of Kandhamal. While we are relieved that the court has made this decision, the victims in the case are still waiting for their compensation. The money has been transferred to the Collector's office with instructions for disbursement. Ten years has passed and as we commemorate the 10th year of the violence on August 23, we should not forget the many victims who have been displaced and hurt by what happened. Many have permanently moved to other parts of the country due to fear of return and reliving the memory of what happened. There are many victims of Kandhamal who are yet to receive adequate compensation and it is disappointing to see that the perpetrators of the carnage are still roaming freely."

John Dayal a civil rights activist and writer said, "We are happy that the government is acting on the enhancement of compensation for which the community had to go to court more than once. Right from the day the violence erupted almost 10 years ago, the administration has been callous and discriminatory on matters of compensation to the victims, many of who remain out of the government lists for various reasons including the under recording of damage to houses. I also urge the administration to give compensation for the Churches and institutional buildings destroyed by the rampaging mobs in 2007 and 2008."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are pleased to hear that justice has been served for the 14 victims who waited for ten years. CSW commends the lawyers for their persistence and stamina to see through these cases until the end. There is still a long way to go for justice to be meted out for the many victims whose lives have been irreversible disrupted because of religious hatred. Nothing can replace the loss of a human life, however, for the 14 who have been promised compensation, we hope that they can have some degree of closure and get on with their lives. We urge the government of India to ensure that all victims of the Kandhamal atrocity are given the justice that they rightly deserve as citizens of India."