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INDIA | Christians Arrested Under Anti-Conversion Law

Four Christians in the district of Simdega, Jharkhand state, India were arrested on charges of conversion on May 29. Local monitoring sources have informed CSW that the charges are false and that this is a case of collusion between the local police and villagers.

Two of the accused, Sumanti Kumari and Rupash Manjhi, both Christians, were scheduled to be married in the village of Podkher, Jharkhand state, on May 30, when the local villagers and some from neighboring villages voiced their opposition to the Christian ceremony.

While the couple sought the help of the police at Bolba police station, the villagers brought the girl's father to the police and alleged that the couple had forcefully tried to convert him. The police then contacted their pastor, Sudarshan Manjhi, and requested that he present himself at the station to conduct the marriage. When he arrived there with his assistant, a First Information Report (FIR) was registered against the pastor, his assistant and the couple. They were charged under Section 4 of the Jharkhand Freedom of Religion Act 2017, which criminalizes religious conversion.

The Christians have been remanded in prison. If found guilty, they face up to three years imprisonment or a fine of about \$750 or both. This is the first reported arrest under Jharkhand's Freedom of Religion Law which came into force on Sept. 11, 2017, the seventh Indian state to introduce such legislation.

This case follows another in West Singhbhum district, Jharkhand State, in which 11 Christians were accused of converting the local community in Manoharpur. Local monitoring groups have said that the complainant was the President of Ho Samaj Mahasabha, an organization that is closely associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which espouses a Hindu nationalist ideology. The 11 men have not been arrested while the police investigate further. Their case was due to be heard June 2.

The Chief Minister of Jharkhand, Raghuvar Das has been known to make vitriolic statements about Christians and threatened to imprison anyone involved in sharing their religion or belief. Ramnath Perti, a social activist from the district of Chaibasa, Jharkhand State, told CSW that "the recent false cases and charges, which have led to several Christians being put in prison, has created a lot of fear among the Christian community. Most of the people who were falsely accused are just laymen. The government is clearly on over-drive with anti-Christian propaganda to terrorize not just Christians but other minorities in Jharkhand."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "India's Freedom of Religion laws, as we see in Jharkhand state, do not uphold freedom of religion or belief. By criminalizing conversion, they impinge on individual choice. This contravenes the right to freedom of religion or belief as articulated in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which India is signatory. We call on the government to drop the charges against these Christians and repeal this legislation which gives the authorities arbitrary powers to investigate religious conversions and is being misused. We also call on law enforcement agencies in Jharkhand to discharge their duties without bias."