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INDIA | Pastor, Wife Attacked

Pastor Paul Stephen was badly beaten and his wife, Prathiba Stephen, was assaulted in an attempted rape that took place during an attack on their house church by Hindu nationalists in Paguthampalayam, in India's southern Tamil Nadu state on July 8.

The attack on the Pentecostal house church followed a year-long campaign of harassment and threats by Hindu nationalists. Seven Christians were present during the attack by five perpetrators on the house church at 10:30 a.m., including an elderly man. At 2 p.m., Pastor Stephen arrived at the church and was assaulted along with his wife, father-in-law, mother-in-law and brother-in-law. A man, known locally as Ajith, reportedly beat Pastor Stephen with a heavy stone.

An ambulance was called, but the injuries sustained by Pastor Stephen and his family were so severe that they were moved to hospital for further treatment. The incident was reported to the police and four people were arrested. Those arrested have submitted a complaint against the pastor and his family accusing them of assault. It is not uncommon for the victims of religiously-motivated violence to find their cases undermined by counter-accusations by their attackers.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The treatment of Pastor Stephen and his family is deeply shocking and we urge the authorities to ensure that the perpetrators are held to account. The cycle of impunity around cases such as this must be broken to ensure that Indian citizens of all religions can exercise their right to practice their religion or belief without fear."

Local monitoring groups have informed CSW that the instigator of the campaign of violence and harassment against Pastor Stephen's church is reportedly the head of local Hindu extremist group Hindu Munnani (Hindu Front), Mr. Gurusamy. After Pastor Stephen reported the incidents, the local government in Tamil Nadu attempted to facilitate peace talks between Mr. Gurusamy and Pastor Stephen in the months before July 8.

Nehemiah Christie, Director of Legislation & Regulations of the Synod of Pentecostal Churches in Tamil Nadu, said, "This shocking attack is an insult to the civil society of Tamil Nadu. The attempted rape of Prathiba Stephen is unacceptable, as is the

following attack on Pastor Stephen, his wife and his family. We condemn this inhuman attack against innocent Christian believers, as well as the inaction of the Tamil Nadu authorities in dealing with the constant harassment instigated by Hindu Munnani in the run-up to the attack on July 8. We hope that the authorities will now take seriously the concerns raised by civil society in both Tamil Nadu and wider Indian society.”

In other news, villagers in Phulpahari, in Dumka District, Jharkhand state held 25 Christians captive for several hours on July 5 after they opposed the Christians sharing their faith. Local sources have confirmed that they were not from the village and some had come from neighboring Bengal. On July 7, a first information report (FIR) was registered against 16 of the Christians by the police, charging them under Section 3 of the Jharkhand Freedom of Religion Act 2017 for “converting or an attempt to convert another person.”

Jharkhand was the seventh Indian state to introduce legislation that criminalizes conversion after the Jharkhand Freedom of Religion Law came into force on Sept. 11, 2017.