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## INDIA | Pastors Arrested, Church Services Disrupted

At least 10 pastors were arrested along with their family members on Sept. 23 while they were participating in Sunday church services across the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. A number of Christians were also threatened by the the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which espouses a Hindu nationalist ideology.

On Sept. 24, three more individuals were arrested and another pastor was threatened. In one of the most concerning cases, a mob entered the Assembly of Believers Church in Shastri Nagar Kanpur and threatened Pastor Shaliendra Emmanuel and his congregation with “severe consequences” if they did not stop the Sunday service.

In Kariyabar, Hindutva affiliated groups informed police that a church led by Bahavan Ram was converting people, which resulted in police visiting the church and disrupting the Sunday service. In this case, the police did not find any evidence to support the accusations and nobody was arrested.

On Sept. 24, Pastor Nanelal was repairing his church hall in Gopalapur, Jaunpur, when he was also visited by a team of police, who proceeded to threaten him with severe consequences if he did not stop conducting Sunday worship.

These events follow numerous similar cases that have taken place in Uttar Pradesh over the last month. CSW sources estimate that at least 23 pastors and family members have been arrested and detained arbitrarily in a similar manner between Aug. 20 and Sept. 18. Some of these individuals have since been released.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “Recent events in Uttar Pradesh are deeply worrying and indicative of a concerning increase in religious intolerance in India. The arbitrary arrests by the police go against the rule of law and we call on the Government of India to ensure the release of all pastors currently held in detention, and to work to protect the right to freedom of religion of belief for all Indians, as guaranteed by the Constitution of India and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which India is a party.”

Arrests based on allegations of conversion are not the only indicator of rising religious intolerance in Uttar Pradesh. On Sept. 16 a mob of about 200 people led a procession

and desecrated prayer service premises in Jeevan Jyoti, hoisting saffron flags, playing loud music and dancing on the dais. As a result, the church was unable to conduct its service, and subsequent prayer services on Sept. 18 and 23 were also canceled.

On Sept. 13, a prayer meeting being held at Jeevan Marg Charitable Trust's premises in village Karmahi, Jaunpur was attacked by a violent mob. All those participating in the meeting, including Pastor Ravindra Maurya, were forced to flee for their lives.

Religious intolerance has been rising ever since the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were elected in 2014. Hindu extremists were further emboldened by the BJP victory at the Uttar Pradesh assembly polls in 2017, and have since threatened religious minorities and carried out vigilante attacks, including lynching people for alleged beef slaughter.