



28 May 2021

Disinformation and Hatred Against Religious Minorities in India and Nepal

Written statement submitted to the Human Rights Council 47th session, 21 June – 15 July 2021, under Agenda Item 3: Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) is a network of churches in over 130 nations that have each formed an evangelical alliance and over 100 international organizations joining together to give a world-wide identity, voice, and platform to more than 600 million evangelical Christians worldwide.

For additional information, please contact: Michael Mutzner, WEA Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva at geneva@worlddea.org or +41.22.890.1030, or visit <https://un.worlddea.org>

World Evangelical Alliance C/O RES CP 23, 1211 Geneva 8, Switzerland

Introduction

In her 13 April 2021 report titled “Disinformation and Freedom of Opinion and Expression,”¹ Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression Irene Khan wrote: “Ideological and identity-based disinformation has fomented discrimination and hatred against minorities, migrants and other marginalized communities, generating ethnic or religious tensions that have culminated, at times, in violence offline”.

This statement focuses specifically on how the cited ideological and identity-based disinformation promoted by Hindu nationalist groups in India and Nepal has been used against religious minority groups, particularly local Christians, with inaction from or even complicity of the national governments.

Disinformation and Hatred Against Minorities in India

In India, since 2014 there has been an unspoken yet tangible shift in the public sphere and in the individual consciousness of citizens towards a discriminatory consensus around a violent, Hindu-chauvinist ideology commonly referred to as Hindutva. The primary objective of this ideology has been the (future) installation of a territorially expanded Hindu nation in which religious minorities such as Muslims, Christians and Sikhs would either reconvert to Hinduism, become second-class citizens without fundamental rights in law or be expelled entirely from the nation, deprived of their citizenship and left stateless.

Against this background, disinformation on social media is rife and used to further stigmatize religious minorities. In dozens of incidents, Christians are clearly identified in videos and photos online, and accused of “conversion” activities. As of March 2020, disinformation led to entrenched rumors that Muslims were ‘intentionally’ infecting Hindus with the COVID-19 virus through a range of behaviors.²

One of the many illustrations is the 22 June 2020 incident in Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh, where a video purportedly claiming religious conversion went viral on social media.³ Mr. Onkar Singh, a social worker, claimed that volunteers of the Human Development Service Association (HDSA), a Christian group, called him to the office of their church and tried to convert him on the pretext of giving free food grains. He alleged that the entire process of conversion went on for several days during and after lockdown. He further claimed that missionaries convert others by offering prayers to the needy. In response, HDSA Director Father Thomas Philip refuted all such allegations. He explained that HDSA had received a list of needy families from the administration, and about 80 thousand people had been provided with food.

1 <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/47/25>

2 Disinformation against Indian Muslims during the COVID-19 pandemic, 24 September 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediase/2020/09/24/disinformation-against-indian-muslims-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

3 This incident was documented by the Evangelical Fellowship of India Religious Liberty Commission’s (EFIRLC) in their annual report 2020, published in January 2021: <https://efionline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/RLC-Report-2021.pdf>

Instead of actively combating disinformation, the government of India, led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, have further solidified the environment of hate and intolerance toward religious minorities in the recent years. Through 2020-2021, human rights groups and religious liberty watchdogs have documented escalation of violence, hate speech, and disinformation. Of 327 incidents of violence against Christian minority documented in 2020 by the Evangelical Fellowship of India, at least nine involved organized hate campaigns.

In this context, disinformation, coupled with the Indian government complicity, has a detrimental effect on the right to freedom of expression of religious minority groups in India.

Disinformation and Hatred Against Minorities in Nepal

Disinformation incidents in Nepal take place in a context of increased harassment of Christians, following the enactment of new criminal code in 2017. Although to-date no one has been sentenced on the basis of the new criminal code, its articles have legitimized police and judicial harassment of pastors and Christians in Nepal.⁴

The government of Nepal seems unwilling to intervene against the spread of misinformation via digital technology, which further stigmatizes the Christian minority, and threatens the Christians' ability to freely and safely speak up and express their opinions.

On 5 April 2021, a falsified document attributed to the Nepal Christian Society (NCS) and the National Churches Fellowship of Nepal (NCFN) appeared on a Hindu nationalist leaders' Facebook account. The said document portrayed Christian groups as seeking ethnic divisions, specifically among the upper-caste Brahmin and Chhetri communities, to gain converts.⁵ The fabricated document soon went viral. It alleged that local Christians would respond to a national population census in a way promoting divisions inside the Brahmin community. In Nepal, a national census was scheduled for June 2021, but was postponed as the country experiences an upsurge in Covid-19 cases and deaths.

A Nepali journalist shared the fake document on Twitter. Then, Kamal Thapa, former deputy Prime Minister of Nepal and Hindu nationalist Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) chief, re-tweeted it, asking the Prime Minister of Nepal to take action against the Christians' plans. Members of the RPP used the document to justify their demand that registrations of Christian charities be canceled.

The Nepal Christian Society and the National Churches Fellowship of Nepal issued separate press releases, refuting the claims in the fabricated document and that was attributed to them. On 8 April, the representatives of NCF and of NCFN registered a complaint with the police office in Lalitpur. Based on the response of the police, the concerned parties do not expect that the police will take any action on this case.

4 Freedom of Religion or Belief in Nepal – Report to the Universal Periodic Review 37th Session, World Evangelical Alliance, 9 July 2020 <https://un.worldea.org/report-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-in-nepal/>

5 Campaign Launched to Discredit Christian Groups in Nepal, Morning Star News, April 28, 2021, <https://morningstarnews.org/2021/04/campaign-launched-to-discredit-christian-groups-in-nepal/>

NepalFactCheck.org, a fact checking website run by the Nepalese non-profit Center for Media Research, stated that the statement that was attributed to the Christians organizations was indeed fake.⁶

The government took no initiative against the misinformation, neither did it reach out to the concerned Christian organizations to seek clarification.

Recommendations to the Governments of India and Nepal

Under “State responses to disinformation: key concerns,” the Special Rapporteur wrote in her report that “State responses to disinformation can take various forms, ranging from measures to disrupt the Internet and legislation to censor, punish or restrict dissemination to the regulation of social media platforms.” (Paragraph 46)

However, in India and in Nepal, the governments’ response to disinformation has been inaction, disregard, and even complicity. Considering that disinformation is often used to foment hatred and violence, namely against religious minorities, we view governments’ inaction against the viral spread of such information as a violation of their obligation to protect human rights, including freedom of expression.

We urge the governments of Nepal and of India to take active steps to address disinformation that is targeted at religious minority groups. Governments have the responsibility to enable and ensure a context that is conducive for religious minorities to feel emboldened to speak up and express themselves without fear.

6 <http://www.nepalfactcheck.org/2021/04/christian-press-release/>