News

by Matters India

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A national-level group of Catholic women has asked the head of the Catholic Church in India to take steps to remove a rape-accused prelate from the bishop's house as his presence there threatens the case's fair trial.

The "Sisters in Solidarity" letter also urges Cardinal Oswald Gracias, the president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, to reach out to the abuse survivors with "deep care and concern."

The group's March 6 letter, sent two days ahead of the International Women's Day, wants the bishops to implement without delay their 2017 Guidelines to Deal with Sexual Harassment at Workplace and India's 2013 Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act.

Kochurani Abraham, a group member, told Matters India March 7 that their letter demands that the conference leaders honor the "zero tolerance" against clergy sexual abuse that the bishops declared at their Feb. 13-19 plenary assembly in Bengaluru.

The letter was signed by 16 representatives of various women groups in the country and the Indian Women Theologians Forum and the Forum for Justice and Peace, an advocacy group of Catholic religious women, brothers and priests.

Copies of the letter were also sent to other conference officials.

The letter says the "Catholic Church leadership should no longer allow the accused bishop to stay in Jalandhar as this reflects the Church's support, and further enables him to garner local support which may influence the case and be a threat to a fair trial."

It was sent to the cardinal a day before the District and Sessions Court in Kottayam, Kerala, heard the rape case against Bishop Franco Mulakkal of Jalandhar.

On March 7, the court held in-camera hearing of two petitions from the bishop's lawyers — dismissal of the case and issuing of a gag order on media and social media platforms. The court posted the next hearing to March 16 when it is expected to give its verdict on the two petitions.

Meanwhile, the Catholic women's group expresses its solidarity with the survivors of clergy sexual abuse and their struggle for justice in the church.

The group wants the bishops to support such people "in every way possible — emotionally, medically, legally and financially so that they are enabled to seek justice."

The women leaders welcomed the bishops' seriousness in "taking necessary disciplinary action against offenders, irrespective of their standing in the Church" and their resolve to "reach out to survivors of abuse with compassion and care, so as to accompany them in their healing and assist them in rebuilding their lives."

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However, the group regrets that the rape case involving the bishop has "called to question the very credibility of the Church in India."

The nun survivor of sexual assault, it points out, was forced to approach the civil courts of law on being denied justice by the church authorities. "She took this daring

step after the bishop himself had filed false cases against her, her family members and the family members of the sisters who supported her," the Sisters in Solidarity said.

The survivor's letters seeking justice from the church leadership in India, and the Vatican received no acknowledgement or response.

"None of the senior members of the Church visited her on behalf of Church leadership since the crime was reported. You yourself have visited the vicinity of her convent but failed to call in to find out about the trauma she had and continues to undergo. She and her small band of companions continue to experience alienation within their congregation and in the religious community where they reside."

The accused bishop, on the other hand, has received "the full support of church leaders" as evident from "the fact that he continues to be a bishop and resides in the bishop's house at Jalandhar, and that he was not only visited in prison by bishops, but is accompanied to court by a battery of priests."

Although the rape-accused is without administrative powers, his presence in the bishop's house has been affecting the survivor and her companions adversely as the community still perceives him as their bishop. As bishop of Jalandhar, Mulakkal has oversight of the accuser's congregation, the Missionaries of Jesus in Kerala.

"He was given a rousing welcome on his return from prison, and his supporters have also mounted an aggressive media campaign through a YouTube channel called 'Christian Times,' " the women's group bemoans.

The group also brought to the cardinal's attention another nun's recent accusation of sexual misconduct against the same bishop.