News
Social Justice



Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Nirmalini, who heads the Conference of Religious in India, addresses a June 4 protest rally in Bengaluru to condemn government apathy to women wrestler's demands and to violence in Manipur state. (Courtesy of Sister Clarice Maria)



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Catholic religious congregations in India seem to have taken a "wakeup call" seriously from their leader.

"We cannot be silent when the country is burning with divisive forces everywhere," Sr. Maria Nirmalini, president of the Conference of Religious India, said in a June 1 letter addressed to more than 130,000 nuns, priests and brothers belonging to 399 congregations across the country.

Nirmalini, a Apostolic Carmel sister, asked her people to "get out from their comfort zones and play a prophetic role" by proclaiming their solidarity with various groups in the country seeking justice.

She suggested several ways for her people to get involved in critical issues, such as collaborating with and supporting protests, marches, rallies and sit-ins.

Nirmalini then walked the talk June 4 by joining a rally organized by religious congregations in Bengaluru, the southern Indian city where she is based.



Women religious leaders shout slogans in support of striking women wrestlers and against government apathy toward violence in Manipur state, in Bengaluru, India, on June 4. (Courtesy of Sister Clarice Maria)

The rallyists pledged their support to international award-winning women wrestlers from India who are demanding justice against sexual harassment by the head of the Wrestling Federation of India.

Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ Sr. Roshni Karimundackal, the secretary of the Karnataka district of the Conference of Religious India, told GSR that a large number of people from diverse backgrounds joined the Bengaluru protest marches that denounced atrocities against women wrestlers and against Christians in Manipur state.

On June 3, Presentation Sr. Dorothy Fernandes, national convener of the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace, joined with civil society organizations to organize a protest march in the eastern Indian city of Patna, expressing solidarity with the women wrestlers.

Fernandes organized Catholic nuns for the 2.5-mile rally. "We should not work in isolation but join others wherever possible," she told GSR.



Presentation Sr. Dorothy Fernandes (center right, in gray, wearing dark-rimmed glasses) walks in a protest rally in Patna, Central India, on June 3 pledging support women wrestlers who are striking against workplace sexual harassment and expressing solidarity with the victims of Manipur violence. (Courtesy of Sr. Dorothy Fernandes)

The social activist nun said she was upset over the official church's "slow response" to Manipur violence and other national issues. She said the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India asked Catholics to pray for Manipur only after her advocacy group sent an open letter challenging the conference's inaction.

"Prayer is personal and religious," she asserted. "The bishops should press the government for an amicable solution."

On June 6, Catholic nuns in Mangalore, a southwestern Indian port city, joined groups protesting government inaction in controlling violence against Christians in Manipur, which is in northeastern India.

Addressing the rally, Bethany provincial Sr. Cecilia Mendonca condemned the government for not protecting "our sisters there."



Bethany Sr. Cicilia Mendonca addresses the rally in Mangalore, India, on June 6, asking the government to protect Christians and the religious serving in Manipur state. (Courtesy of Canera Communications/Fr. Anil Ivan Fernandes)

One sister from Manipur, Sister Amritha, told GSR that she and her companions escaped to a relief camp after a mob attacked their convent in Imphal, torched a church and ransacked a school.

"It is a war-like situation there, and almost like a communal conflict between Hindus and Christians," she added.

On June 10, the Catholic religious in northeastern India joined more than 300 people for a silent rally to show solidarity with pressing national issues.

"From the targeted violence against Christians and tribals in Manipur to the relentless attacks on church personnel and institutions and the disturbing

normalization of hate speeches, our country is witnessing a wave of alarming events," lamented Christian Br. Sunil Britto, the main organizer of the program held at Nongpoh in the Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya.



During the June 6 protest rally in Mangalore, India, protesters carry placards pledging solidarity with Christians in Manipur state. (Courtesy of Canera Communications/Fr. Anil Ivan Fernandes)

The participants displayed posters advocating peace, solidarity and justice for all. The rally served as a powerful reminder of the urgent need for collective action and social change, Britto said.

Nirmalini says she salutes the women wrestlers for daring to challenge patriarchy and assert their rights as women and persons of human dignity. She hails the protesting wrestlers as "an example to women who face recurring sexual harassment in their workplace, neighborhoods, and in public spaces."

"The victimized wrestlers are not Catholics, but they are Indians and our proud daughters, and we all have a responsibility to stand by them," Nirmalini said.

She regretted that the police, instead of taking action on the wrestlers' complaints, forcefully removed them from Jantar Mantar and registered cases against them.

The wrestlers first protested in January but called it off after the Indian government promised to look into their complaints. When no action came, they relaunched the protest April 23 at Jantar Mantar, a popular site for public protest in New Delhi, and demanded the arrest of the federation chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh.



Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Nirmalini reads out a statement on June 4 in Bengaluru, India, pledging support to women wrestlers who are striking against workplace sexual harassment. (Courtesy of Sister Clarice Maria)

They suspended the protest June 7 after the government's sports minister promised to speed up the probe against the federation chief.

Nirmalini is also upset at recent events in Manipur where nearly 60% of 3.4 million people belong to the Hindu-majority Meitei group, while largely Christian tribal groups such as Kukis and Nagas make up the rest.

Speaking to Global Sisters Report on June 8, the 59-year-old nun criticized the Indian government's failure to control riots and establish law and order in Manipur.

So far, nearly 100 civilians were killed and hundreds of churches burned, including the cathedral church in Imphal, the capital of Manipur state.

Nirmalini wants Catholic religious to express their solidarity with the Christians, including Catholic religious congregations serving Manipur, "who are undergoing trauma and fear."

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The directory of the Imphal Diocese, which covers the entire state of Manipur, lists 24 women religious congregations serving in Manipur, as well as a few men congregations.

Nirmalini wants her people to show solidarity with Muslims, who are being denigrated by Hindu radical groups. Muslims, the largest religious minority, form an estimated 15% of the country's 1.41 billion people.

Claretian Fr. George Kannanthanam, a social activist in Bengaluru, applauded Nirmalini's "efficient leadership" in troubled situations and in encouraging her people to leave their comfort zones.

He, too, was unhappy with the official church's slow response to national crises.

"We are slower than even the government in responding to such situations," he told GSR.

He alleged that the church responds "only after everything is finished and their own theological analysis done."