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Gujarat: A Case Laboratory in Communal Injustice

Congressman Pitt, honorable committee members, ladies and gentlemen:

Discrimination, injustice, and denial of rights, or our support to regimes those involve in such practices is the leading cause of civil unrest and terrorism.

India's large and religiously diverse population makes it one of the most pluralistic societies in the world. However, lately there has been an alarming rise in discrimination and violence against religious minorities such as Muslims and Christians in various states across India. Leading the charge are the states of Gujarat, Orissa and Karnataka. Such systematic violence in part is attributable to a rise in Hindu nationalism – also called Hindutva.

Prof. Subramanian Swami who taught at Harvard University recently wrote Muslims and other minorities of India must either accept that their ancestors were Hindu, or live as second-class citizens, or leave India. Disturbed at communal intolerance of Swami, Harvard terminated his fellowship.

But Swami's call resonates with the likes of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi who is accused of masterminding and carrying out Gujarat massacre of 2002, that followed Godhra train coach burning incident, blamed on the local Muslims, which killed 58 Hindu kar sevaks returning from Ayodhya.

Modi government swiftly arrested several hundred Godhra Muslims under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) for burning the coach – which the Central government inquiry ruled was a mere “accident”. Held without charge for ten years, 63 out of nearly 300 were subsequently charged, 31 found guilty and 11 awarded death sentences.

However, for the riots that followed the coach-burning, killing more than 2000 innocent Gujarati Muslims, not even a handful of arrests been made. Those who planned and carried out the killings have been provided total immunity by Gujarat government. Police officers who helped the rioters kill Muslims were given promotions and those who stopped riots or saved Muslim victims were demoted or suspended. The Central government, blunted by its own abysmal handling of the 1984 Sikh pogrom, stayed mostly quiet at this injustice in Gujarat.

I am the son-in-law of the former M.P. Ahsan Jafri, who was among those killed in Gujarat genocide. His house was burnt along with dozens of innocent men, women and children who had gathered in his house seeking protection from the killer mob on February 28, 2002. My mother-in-law, Zakia Jafri, is still fighting for justice. But justice continues to elude us, just as it does every Muslim victim of the Gujarat massacre.

More than 16,000 Muslims displaced by the riots are still languishing in relief colonies that are denied even the most basic amenities. Modi called these camps “baby producing factories” and refused government support. He also called the riots as a “reaction for the Godhra action” and announced compensation for the Hindu victims of the coach at two hundred thousand rupees but Muslim victims in the riots that followed at half that amount.

RSS, VHP, Bajrang Dal and many other Hindu Nationalist organizations – loosely called Sangh outfits – called Gujarat as the ‘Hindutva Laboratory’ and pledged to replicate it elsewhere in India. Already Christians and Muslims are targets in Karnataka, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Assam and other Indian states. Churches are burnt, Lower Caste Hindus who accept Christianity, or Islam, to escape the social stigma associated with their caste, are being forcefully reconverted back to Hinduism.

America believes and acts when needed, to preserve and propagate liberty and justice, even in countries where our security and financial interests are not at stake. In the aftermath of the Gujarat massacre, our then Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice asked Indian government to ensure justice in Gujarat. We also canceled Chief Minister Modi’s US visa. Modi continues to be a persona non-grata, not just in the US, but many other European countries as well. But that has not helped the process of justice in Gujarat move swiftly, or without political influence and interference from Mr. Modi.

In an effort to put a curtain on his role in the 2002 massacre, Modi is now projecting himself as the development guru. Businesses that usually disregard human rights for increased security and strong leadership from the administration, are increasingly accepting Mr. Modi as the future Prime Minister.

For those of us who have not forgotten the lessons learnt from Adolf Hitler, it is a deja vu. Troubling too. Having interviewed Modi, several years before he became the Chief Minister, eminent social scientist Prof. Ashish Nandy had said, “Modi is a text-book case of a fascist”. Can United States do business with Hitler or Hitler-likes? Or let him continue in power? Anywhere? I hope not.

I urge you, Congressman, to ensure we do not give recognition to Mr. Modi but rather use the United States' influence and friendship with India to ensure freedom, justice and security for the minorities of Gujarat as well as other Indian states. An inclusive India would also be stronger India, that could provide power for our mutual progress, economic development, and growth.

That goal can not be realized without ensuring justice to the minorities of Gujarat. Justice must be done and it must seem to be done, because when justice in good faith is denied – even based on legal technicalities, or political influences – the result is simmering frustration that further fuels terrorism.

Thank you for listening.