

Condemn religious violence: US to India ahead of PM trip.

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WASHINGTON/DELHI: The United States wants India to condemn persistent religious violence, a senior official said on Monday, one month before a state visit by PM Narendra Modi.

The US State Department has released its annual report on religious freedom, which listed attacks on religious minorities, including Muslims and Christians in India. Citing targeted attacks against Muslims, Christians and other minorities, it said it will continue to work with civil society members, courageous journalists and speak directly to its counterparts to address these issues.

A senior US official, briefing journalists on the report on customary condition of anonymity, spoke of India's "vast potential" and said he was "saddened" by the persistence of religious violence. "Regarding these concerns, we're continuing to encourage the government to condemn violence and hold accountable (those) who engage in rhetoric that's dehumanising towards religious minorities," the official said.

PM Modi will come face-to-face with President Biden later this week at the G7 summit in Japan, and next week also at the Quad summit in Australia, before undertaking his state visit to the US in June.

"What we outline in today's report is continued targeted attacks against religious communities, including Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindu Dalits, and indigenous communities; dehumanising rhetoric, including open calls for genocide against Muslims; lynching and other hate-fuelled violence, attacks on houses of worship and home demolitions, and in some cases impunity and even clemency for those who've engaged in attacks on religious minorities... we're also continuing to see, at the state level, some restrictions on religious attire," said the official and promised to speak "directly" with Indian officials.

The report, based on direct research as well as accounts by media and advocacy groups, pointed to concerns about home demolitions against Muslims and public flogging by police of Muslims accused of injuring Hindus in Gujarat.

New Delhi has long hit back at American criticism on religious freedom, particularly by the autonomous US Commission on International Religious Freedom, which earlier this month once again recommended that the State Department put India on a blacklist over its record.

Later this year, secretary of state Antony Blinken will list "countries of particular concern" on religious freedom, but it is virtually certain he will spare India, with which the US has been building warmer relations for decades, partly as a bulwark against China.

Blinken, presenting the report, did not mention India as he voiced alarm by actions by authorities in China, Iran, Myanmar and Nicaragua.

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