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# India: Activists slam 'witch hunt' of foreign-funded NGOs

Rights groups say New Delhi's move to deny permission for a charity founded by Mother Teresa to receive foreign funding is an attempt to silence organizations critical of government policies.



Missionaries of Charity was founded in 1950 by Mother Teresa, a Catholic nun who devoted most of her life to helping the poor in Kolkata city

The Indian government's recent decision to [cut off foreign funding for a charity founded by Mother Teresa](#) has drawn sharp criticism from NGOs and rights activists.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government refused permission to the Missionaries of Charity (MoC) under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) after it received some "adverse inputs," a statement issued by the Home Ministry said on December 25.

"While considering the MoC's renewal application, some adverse inputs were noticed," the ministry noted, without providing details.

The charity — founded in 1950 by the late Mother Teresa, a Catholic nun who devoted most of her life to helping poor people in the eastern city of Kolkata — has more than 3,000 nuns worldwide who run hospices, community kitchens, schools, leper colonies and homes for abandoned children.

Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work and [was later declared a saint](#). The MoC, which runs shelter homes across India, received about \$750 million (€660 million) from abroad in the 2020-21 financial year, according to The Hindu newspaper.

### **Activists criticize Modi's government**

The MoC said in a statement that it had instructed its centers not to use any foreign currency account "until the matter is resolved."

The organization, however, rejected reports that its bank accounts had been frozen.

The government's move came just two weeks after police in Gujarat state began investigating the charity for "forceful conversion" of Hindus to Christianity.

Hard-line adherents of Hinduism, India's majority religion, often accuse the MoC and other Christian charities of engaging in religious conversions.

Activists say religious minorities in India have faced increased levels of discrimination and violence since [Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party \(BJP\)](#) came to power in 2014.

Modi's government rejects reports that officials have a radical "Hindutva" (Hindu hegemony) agenda and insists that people of all religions have equal rights.

"While FCRA permissions are largely denied to these organizations, other outfits that are aligned to the Hindu right wing are allowed to receive funds with little or no scrutiny," renowned criminal lawyer Rebecca John told DW.

"FCRA has now become weaponized to compel organizations and trusts which work in the NGO sector to close their foreign accounts and thereby minimize their work in India," John said.

**Henri Tiphagne**, executive director of People's Watch, called the government's actions "a complete witch hunt."

His organization's foreign funding was suspended in 2012, and he is still contesting the matter in the courts.

### **Many NGOs hit by restrictions**

This is not the first time the [Indian government has denied permission for an NGO to receive foreign funding](#).

In 2020, the rights group Amnesty International announced that it was [halting operations in India](#), citing a "continuing crackdown" and "harassment" by PM Modi's government.

Amnesty's bank accounts had been frozen by India's Enforcement Directorate, a governmental investigative agency, forcing it to lay off its 150 staff members and stop campaign and research work.

Other organizations — including Sabrang India, Lawyers Collective and Navsarjan Trust — were also targeted under the FCRA.

These organizations criticized infrastructure and mining projects, sought justice for the anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat in 2002 and exposed violations against Dalit people. In response, they faced repeated questions about their work, threats of investigations and blocked foreign funding.

Groups such as Greenpeace India and the Ford Foundation have also been hit with restrictions.

With the bulk of the NGOs' funding cut, many have found it difficult operate and decided to shut shop.

### **'Extremely concerning'**

Six months ago, authorities stopped the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), a civil liberties group, from receiving foreign contributions.

People working for the organization say they were surprised by the decision as CHRI works with stakeholders in the government.

They challenged the move at the Delhi High Court and are awaiting its verdict.

"The National Human Rights Commission, state police and prison departments, and legal aid institutions recognize CHRI as a resource partner and expert in the domains of police and prison reform and transparency in governance," CHRI director Sanjoy Hazarika told DW.

"We are an acknowledged specialist in the field of right to information," Hazarika said. Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director at Human Rights Watch, told DW that it's "extremely concerning" that authorities are targeting rights groups.

"It unfortunately indicates a lack of confidence when a proud democracy cannot tolerate either criticism or the ability of groups to address entrenched social inequity," she said.

*Edited by: Srinivas Mazumdaru*

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