India reported 108 cases of beatings, an incident.

Mr. BURTON of Indiana. Mr. Speaker, I was disturbed to learn of the organized protests against Pope John Paul II in anticipation of his recent visit to India. In fact, many would tell you that there was more reason to worry about his safety on this trip than when he traveled to communist Poland under martial law. Although the Pope left the country safely, I cannot forget the ghastly image printed by the media of Hindu activists burning an effigy of Pope John Paul II in New Delhi before his visit.

Mr. Speaker, these protests were led by a violent faction of Hindu fundamentalists that are closely aligned with the Hindu nationalist government. They have carried out a wave of brutal attacks on Christians within the past year. Since Christmas Day of 1998, they have burned down Christian churches, prayer halls, and schools. Also, four priests have been murdered, and earlier this year, a handful of Indian Christians have been murdered.

How much more of this must we witness? Already 200,000 Christians, 250,000 Sikhs, 65,000 Muslims, and tens of thousands of others have fallen at the hands of either the Indian government or those closely related to the government since the subcontinent’s independence a century ago.

Mr. Speaker, I submit the articles from India Abroad and the New York Post into the Record regarding this disturbing issue.

[From the New York Post, Oct. 28, 1999]

Will Pope John Paul II be safe in India? There is a reason to worry for the pontiff’s welfare as he visits the world’s largest democracy next week than there was when he went to communist Poland under martial law.

That’s because a small but violent faction of Hindu fundamentalists aligned with the Hindu nationalist government have been conducting an organized campaign against the pope as part of a concerted effort to demonize and persecute the country’s tiny Christian minority.

The government promises to protect the Holy Father from coalition fanatics. But while John Paul can rely on state security, his Catholic followers and Protestant brethren remain at the mercy of Hindu brown-shirts.

These thugs have carried out vicious attacks on Christians since a coalition led by the hard-line Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power two years ago.

Freedom House, the Washington-based human-rights organization, says there have been more recorded incidents of violence against India’s Christian minority in the past year than in the previous half-century. The most shocking incident took place in January, when Hindu thugs burned alive Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two little boys. That was far from an isolated incident.

In 1998, the Catholic Bishop’s Conference in India reported 108 cases of beatings, stonings, church burnings, looting of religious schools and organizations, and other attacks on Catholics and evangelism.

It has been just as bad this year. Just last month, a Catholic priest working in the same territory where Staines family was murdered while saying Mass for converts, his heart pierced by a poison-tipped arrow.

Why the attacks? Hindu nationalist leaders, particularly those associated with the BJP-allied World Hindu Congress (VHP), claim Christians are on ‘conversion drive.’

This is preposterous. Despite being present in India for almost 2,000 years, and educating hundreds of millions of Indian children, Christianity claims the allegiance of less than 3 percent of the country’s people.

Even in Orissa state, site of the worst anti-Christian violence, fewer than 500 conversions occur each year.

Still, Hindu nationalists continue to make wild-eyed assertions, such as VHP leader Mohan Joshi’s recent statement that missionary homes run by Mother Teresa’s order are ‘nothing but conversion centers.’

Not true, but if it were, so what?

We know perfectly well what would have become of the diseased and the destitute had Mother Teresa not rescued them from the gutter: They would have been left to die in the gutter, condemned by a culture that decrees these lowborn souls deserve their fate.

‘What has the VHP done to better the life of the low castes? The answer is nothing,’ says Freedom House investigator Joseph Ayoad.

“When I was in India, I talked to one Christian who was forcibly converted to Hinduism. He told me when no one cared for us, Christians came and gave us food, gave us shelter and gave us medicine.”

An Indian Protestant activist who lives in New Jersey told me BJP rule has meant open season on followers of Christ.

“The last two years have been unprecedented,” the man says.

“They have burnt churches down, raped nuns, killed people. We complain to the government, but they look the other way.”

The Hindu militants certainly do not represent the sentiments of all Hindus. Indeed, the BJP and its wing affiliate of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which leads the coalition government at the center, that the Pope should make an admission in his public address at Delhi that all the religions are the same and all lead to salvation.

The VHP last week once again welcomed the Pope’s visit, stating that it was not against Christianity, but was opposed to ‘Chuchainment.’

A VHP affiliate, the Sanskriti Rashtra Manch, has already demanded an apology from the Pope for the atrocities committed during Inquisition in Portuguese-ruled Goa in the 16th century.

From Goa, the march passes through Belgaum, Nipani, Mumbai, Kolhapur and Nashik in Karnataka and Maharashtra, before entering Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and then onward to Delhi, covering the 1,300-mile route in about a fortnight. It will reach Delhi by the time of the Pope’s visit on Nov. 5.

Newspaper reports quoted Manohar Parrikar, the BJP Leader of the Opposition in the Goa Assembly, as saying that his party was neither opposing nor supporting the march.

He said the movement’s leadership was not under the control of the BJP and while individual members of the party were free to join it, the party could not be responsible for any untoward incident arising from the march.

IN HONOR OF MARGE WILK, RECIPIENT OF THE “VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR” AWARD FROM THE BAYONNE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.

HON. ROBERT MENENDEZ
OF NEW JERSEY

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Tuesday, November 16, 1999

Mr. MENENDEZ. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize Mrs. Marge Wilk, a life-long resident of Bayonne, New Jersey, for her dedicated service to the Bayonne Historical Society, and for being named this year’s “Volunteer of the Year.”

Mrs. Wilk began her remarkable career in volunteerism with the Bayonne Historical Society, an organization of residents dedicated to preserving the history of this great city. Serving as a trustee for this organization for many years, Mrs. Wilk has devoted countless hours of her time to research, collection and organizing historical data, making our area a more vibrant and knowledgeable community.

The protest march, which is scheduled to end in Delhi around the time of the Pope’s visit, is being called a “Dharma Jagran” or “Jagran Abhiyan.” It was flagged off from Divar, an island off Old Goa, once a center for Catholic evangelism.

“This awareness march is for people of all religions. Christians are brothers of the same blood,” said Subhash Velingkar, one of the organizers of the march.

Velingkar lashed out at the English language media for voicing concern that the march could ignite anti-Christian feelings.

At the same time, however, Velingkar condemned religious conversions saying that they changed “not just the religion of people, but also their culture and traditions.”