



## Association for India's Development

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### Press Release

#### **PROGRESSIVE GROUPS CALL FOR PEACE AND COMMUNAL HARMONY; SEVERAL HUNDRED EXPECTED TO JOIN WORLDWIDE FAST AND CONDEMN VIOLENCE AND GOVERNMENT INACTION**

#### **For immediate release:**

Distressed by the flames of communal violence burning in the Indian state of Gujarat, several groups and individuals have come together calling for peace and communal harmony. This includes several volunteers of the Association for India's Development (AID) and Asha for Education. The groups are appealing to all individuals and associations who have been troubled by the recent happenings that they need to take stand against communal violence.

Says Kiran Vissa, an AID volunteer from Maryland, "We need to assert that from a basic human standpoint, what has happened in Godhra and across Gujarat in the past few days is intolerable and inhuman. In the face of such brutality, the only way we can retain our humanity is by clearly and without ambiguity stating our moral stand."

Seeking inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi, these groups are encouraging people all over the world to participate in a one-day fast for peace and communal harmony. Good health permitting, the people are asked to undertake a fast for 24 hours or at their option a dawn to dusk fast on one day this week and register themselves at the campaign website [www.aidindia.org/fastforpeace](http://www.aidindia.org/fastforpeace). Those unable to fast are being encouraged to express their solidarity by signing on to the website and lighting a candle at home or by joining a group doing so publicly. The father of India's freedom struggle, Gandhi made fasting for communal harmony both a personal penance as well as a key tactic to quell communal riots between India's Hindu and Muslim communities during the independence struggle over 50 years ago. Yet it is both ironical and tragic that the present violence is happening in Gandhi's home state of Gujarat.

A brief note accompanying the appeal makes the following statements:

- We sincerely share the anguish of the people who have been affected by the violence.
- We strongly condemn the violent acts and the actions of those who incited them.

Peace and Communal Harmony Week: [www.aidindia.org/fastforpeace/](http://www.aidindia.org/fastforpeace/)

- We believe that peace and harmony among its diverse communities should be the basis for India, and the stirring up of passions against such harmony is the biggest disservice to the people, the country and humanity.
- Many of us might belong to a minority community in countries or regions we live in, and we are aware that if society does not promote peace and harmony and prevent violence, few of us can survive.
- We believe that the government is responsible for promoting peace for all its citizens, and the deliberate behaviour of the government in failing to protect its citizens, and in encouraging violence, is utterly reprehensible.

As of the morning of March 6<sup>th</sup>, 170 people has already joined the call to fast and it is expected that several hundred people more will eventually join to sign on expressing their solidarity with the fast and call on an end to communal violence.

Several concerned Indians in the Metro Washington DC area are also organizing a peace rally for religious harmony scheduled between 5 and 6 pm on Wednesday March 6. The rally is at the Mahatma Gandhi statue on 21<sup>st</sup> and Mass. Avenue (Dupont Circle Metro). This venue is a popular site for progressive activists.

Volunteers are also encouraging Indian associations, businesses, professional, cultural and community groups across the world to make phone calls or send faxes/letters to the Indian Prime Minister, the Indian embassies and all relevant government offices and media organizations. Links to petitions and other useful resources are also included at the end of this release.

The violence in the state of Gujarat is happening in the context of the on going disputed Babri mosque site in Ayodhya. The mosque was demolished by a mob of militant Hindu activists in December 1992 claiming the site was the birthplace of Lord Ram and that they wanted to construct a Hindu temple there. Close to 3000 people died in the related communal violence in 1992-93. Secular groups in India have suggested that government should step in and put an end to the dispute by building a secular monument at the site. AID and ASHA volunteers based in India have sent this message, “The idea of having a monument for peace and harmony of all religions at the disputed site in Ayodhya should be pursued seriously in consultation with peace-loving people. The common people of India live happily with each other irrespective of religion, and unity in diversity is an integral part of their thinking. Such a monument will not only reflect the truth about the civilized billion of Indians who do not support religious fundamentalism, but also will be acknowledged by the nations of the world as a significant and historic step. It will act as a reminder to the few who may stray from the path of tolerance and non-violence, that the agenda of the nation cannot be usurped by their meaningless actions and reason will prevail on this land.”

The Association for India’s Development (AID) is a volunteer-run non-profit association with over 20 active chapters in the US, 4 chapters in India, and one each in the UK, Germany and Australia. In the US, AID is registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. It supports sustainable efforts to empower the rural and urban poor in India through interventions in education, women’s issues, health, savings and income-generating activities. For the past year AID has also been supporting extensive relief and rehabilitation efforts in Gujarat following the January 2001 earthquake.

## **Resources:**

### **1. Websites:**

Peace and Communal Harmony Week website: [www.aidindia.org/fastforpeace/](http://www.aidindia.org/fastforpeace/)  
 “Murder knows no faith” Petition site: [www.indiatogether.org](http://www.indiatogether.org)

## 2. Sponsoring organization and those in solidarity:

Association for India's Development: [www.aidindia.org](http://www.aidindia.org)

ASHA for Education: [www.ashanet.org](http://www.ashanet.org)

## 3. Film

In the Name of God (*Ram ke Naam*): A film by Anand Patwardhan. Visit [www.frif.com](http://www.frif.com) for ordering information.

## 4. Washington DC Peace Rally:

<http://www.indiatogether.org/events/mar02/harmony.pdf>

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<http://www.webdak.com/words/lib/peace.html> )

### **Photographs:**

Mahatma Gandhi's statue in Washington DC is a rallying point for several progressive activists. Those fasting for peace and communal harmony in the Washington DC area will keep vigil at the statue.