

## Bangalore lepers evicted and "betrayed" by the government



Karnataka has decided not to renew the lease of the Sumanahalli Society, depriving it of 45 acres. Operating in Bangalore since 1977, the centre is now left with five acres for more than 400 residents. The facility includes 50 building for lepers, HIV patients, disabled, orphans, street kids and young offenders. For the archbishop of Bangalore, this is a "betrayal of the [Christian] community by the government."

Mumbai (AsiaNews) - The government of Karnataka has approved seizing 45 acres of land used by the Sumanahalli Society, a Catholic organisation that, for the past 30 years, has helped people living with leprosy in Bangalore. Based on an order issued on 21 September, the Catholic organisation will be left with only five acres to provide its services, an area where "it is impossible to contain the activities of more than 400 people," its director, Fr George Kannanthanam, told AsiaNews.

At present, the government is deaf to pleas from civil society groups like NGOs and Church. A demonstration last Monday at the centre got nowhere. Leprosy patients joined the protest, saying "that rather than leave this land, we shall let ourselves die."

In 1977, Karnataka's then chief minister Devaraja Urs called on Bangalore's Christians to take care of the lepers living near the Beggars' Colony, a government-owned area, because the state could not provide for them. To do so, it granted a 30-year lease to the Archdiocese, which set up the Sumanahalli Society.

In 2007, the government decided not to renew the lease, and reduced the area from 63 to 55 acres to widen a road. A building housing beggars and homeless people had to give way.

Mgr Bernard Moras, archbishop of Bangalore, joined the patients' protest, calling it a "betrayal of the community by the government," which invited Christians "to take up this most difficult work" in favour of the sick and needy.

The latest draconian cut to the area is a major headache. The centre includes 50 buildings that provide health care, rehabilitation and basic education.

"We accept lepers, HIV patients, disabled people, orphans, street kids and young offenders," said Fr Kannanthanam. "If we close our structures, where will these people go? The government took this decision but will not provide other areas for the most marginalised."

One study shows that 18,000 people live and sleep in the streets of Bangalore.

For the priest, it is not likely that the centre's good work caused envy and jealousy among Hindu nationalists because of its Catholic character.

"The Sumanahalli Society has never been openly Catholic. After years of service, we do not have a chapel even though we could build one. We chose not to build it to keep the place non-denominational. We have served the sick and marginalised of society without distinction of race or creed. Only one of our resident is Christian."

What is happening, Fr Kannanthanam believes, "ought to shake up the country's collective consciousness. If, as a nation, we try to deprive the most vulnerable strata in society, what moral stand can we claim?"

Nirmala Carvalho