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The Missionaries of Charity (MC) congregation has been compelled to shut Nirmala Shishu Bhawan, a home for orphaned, destitute and abandoned children in Kanpur Cantonment since 1968, following the expiry of its land lease.

The closure of the orphanage in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh comes close on the heels of the federal government's refusal to renew the congregation's Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) registration for foreign donations to carry out its charitable works across the country.

India's defense establishment claimed that the Kanpur home was built on its land for which the lease had expired in 2019. It claimed the MC nuns were trespassers and would have to pay penalty charges or face eviction.

Sister Prema, superior general of the MC congregation, felt it prudent to surrender before army authorities and handed over peaceful possession of the home to the Defence Estates Office (DEO) on Jan. 3.

"It is unfortunate that an institution that served the abandoned and voiceless in the society is shut down instead of the land lease being extended," said Chhotebhai, convener of the Indian Catholic Forum who has been closely associated with the orphanage since its inception.

The MC sisters placed over 1,500 orphans with adoptive families over the past five decades. The 11 remaining children, most of whom were severely handicapped, were relocated to other Shishu Bhawan homes in neighboring Allahabad, Varanasi, Bareilly and Meerut, Chhotebhai told UCA News on Jan. 6.

“The congregation also served thousands of needy people including leprosy patients, unwed mothers and families of migrant laborers,” he added.

The MC congregation founded by Saint Mother Teresa and Catholic Church officials did not react but the Indian Catholic Forum, in a press note, expressed its “deep anguish and dismay.”

The forum questioned the DEO for demanding a huge amount of 10 million rupees (US$250,000) as a penalty from the nuns, calling them trespassers.

It further wondered why the MC congregation did not explore any legal remedies before handing over the land to the cantonment authorities.

“These questions will now remain unanswered. It certainly doesn’t paint the army or DEO in a good light. Did it deliberately choose a soft target knowing that it did not have the stomach for a fight? This selective targeting also seems to have the malodor of a communal bias. Is this how the nation repays the true *deshbhakts* [patriots],” it said in the press note.

The Indian Home Ministry on Christmas Day had “refused” the renewal of the congregation's license to receive funding from abroad. Its statement issued on Dec. 27 disclosed that organizations could not meet “the eligibility conditions” under the FCRA conditions, giving no further details.

In a statement issued on the same day, Sister Prema said: “We have been informed that our FCRA renewal application has not been approved. Therefore, as a measure to ensure there is no lapse, we have asked our centers not to operate any of the FC [foreign contributions] accounts until the matter is resolved.”

The congregation is running short of funds and has sought public support to carry on with its charitable works.

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