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ASIA/INDIA - Two men accused of having participated in the murder of the missionary Graham Staines have been acquitted

Bhubaneswar (Agenzia Fides) - A court in Orissa acquitted Ghanashyam Mohanta and Ranjan Mohanta, two men who were accused of having participated, along with 16 other extremists, in the killing of the Australian Christian missionary Graham Staines and his two children, in 1999, setting fire to their caravan, in the village of Manoharpur in the state of Orissa. Among the culprits found, Dara Singh and Mahendra Hembram are serving life sentence. Ghanashyam and Ranjan were instead arrested in May last year, on the basis of new investigations and witnesses. The defense lawyer said that the two defendants were acquitted for lack of evidence: The prosecution in fact failed to produce conclusive evidence against the two, as the wife of a missionary, a Christian Protestant, failed to identify them with certainty.
On 22 September 2003 a judge had issued a death sentence for Dara Singh and life imprisonment for the other twelve defendants. However, in 2005, the High Court in Orissa commuted death penalty to Dara Singh to life imprisonment. The Court also confirmed life imprisonment for Hembram and acquitted the other 11 men accused of taking part at the stake. In 2011 the Supreme Court, court of third instance in India, confirmed the judgment of the High Court.
Graham Staines and his children, Timothy, age 6, and Philip, 10 years old, were burned alive in the night of 22 January 1999. Gladys Staines, the missionary's wife, already some years ago said she had forgiven the murderers. Staines and his family had opened a leper colony and started missionary activities in the districts of Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar, Orissa. The murder of Staines has become the symbol of violence committed by radical Hindus against Christians in India. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 03/03/2014)

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