We (professors, students, lawyers, writers, doctors, and concerned citizens from Philadelphia and around the world) are outraged to learn that the Wharton India Economic Forum has invited Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of the Indian state of Gujarat, to be a keynote speaker at its 17th Economic Forum on March 23, 2013.

This is the same politician who was refused a diplomatic visa by the United States State Department on March 18, 2005 on the ground that he, as Chief Minister, did nothing to prevent a series of orchestrated riots that targeted Muslims in Gujarat. The most conservative estimates are that over a thousand people, mostly Muslims, died in those riots. Thousands more were forced to leave their homes and businesses. Human Rights Watch (among other international and Indian bodies) showed that politicians and the police in the state abetted the slaughter and displacement of Muslim Gujaratis: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2002/04/29/india-gujarat-officials-took-part-anti-muslim-violence>.

Since then, the Supreme Court of India has repeatedly faulted the Gujarat government led by Mr Modi for failing to prosecute those guilty of the crimes in 2002 and instead of prosecuting whistle-blowers and activists who had tried to bring the guilty to justice. In February 2012, the Supreme Court again criticized the Modi government for using trumped-up charges to harass activists fighting for justice. What this sordid record proves is Mr Modi’s callous disregard for the life of Indian citizens and for the Indian constitution.

In taking cognizance of Mr Modi’s culpability, the State Department also revoked his “existing tourist/business visa under section 212 (a) (2) (g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act.” As David C. Mulford, U.S. Ambassador to India, explained then, “Section 212 (a) (2) (g) makes any foreign government official who ‘was responsible for or directly carried out, at any time, particularly severe violations of religious freedom’ ineligible for a visa to the United States.” Ambassador Mulford went on to say that the State Department’s decision was “based on the fact that, as head of the State government in Gujarat between February 2002 and May 2002, [Modi] was responsible for the performance of state institutions at that time. The State Department's detailed views on this matter are included in its annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices and the International Religious Freedom Report. Both reports document the violence in Gujarat from February 2002 to May 2002 and cite the Indian National Human Rights Commission report, which states there was "a comprehensive failure on the part of the state government to control the persistent violation of rights of life, liberty, equality, and dignity of the people of the state" (<http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rm/2005/43701.htm>).

It is incomprehensible to us that this is the man who the Wharton India Economic Forum wishes to celebrate as an exemplar of economic and social development. We find it astonishing that any academic and student body at the University of Pennsylvania can endorse ideas about economic development that are based on the systematic oppression of minority populations, whether in India or elsewhere. Our role as scholars and students—and indeed as would-be entrepreneurs and business managers—must be to develop conscientious and efficacious modes of economic organization, not to piggy-back onto the inhuman policies of politicians who not only lack a commitment to human rights and to ideals of social justice, but whose political success is based on the suppression of substantial sections of their own citizens. Mr Modi still does not have a US visa to enter the US, but Wharton plans to present him on Skype to the audience. Recently there have been efforts to whitewash Modi’s grim record and to grant him international respectability. Wharton’s invitation lends itself to doing just that.

We urge the Wharton India Economic Forum to revoke their invitation to Narendra Modi. If it does not do not do so, we pledge to protest his presence—virtual as it will be, given that he remains ineligible for a US visa—in a variety of ways, including at the meeting of the Forum. We will also do all that we can to continue to educate our community about the incalculable and continuing harm done by Modi’s brand of politics to the secular values enshrined in India’s constitution.

We should add that signatures are pouring in, and the following names represent those who signed within a few hours of the circulation of this letter.