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Muslim mob in Pakistan wounds Christian family

Assailants threaten to charge mentally ill son with 'blasphemy' if victims pursue justice

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (04.01.2010) / HRWF (05.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Infuriated by an alleged anti-Islamic comment by a mentally ill man, more than a dozen Muslims attacked his Christian family here last week, beating his 20-year-old sister unconscious and breaking her leg.

The woman's father, Aleem Mansoor, said his daughter Elishba Aleem went unconscious after being struck in the head with an iron rod in the Dec. 28 attack. Mansoor said a Muslim known as Mogal beat him and his daughter with the rod on the street in front of their apartment home after falsely accusing his 32-year old son, who suffers from schizophrenia, of blasphemy.

"Elishba shouted, 'Father look! He is going to hit you,' and she came somewhat in front and the rod hit her head," Mansoor told Compass. "She touched her head, and her hand was covered with blood."

After she fell unconscious, the assailants began striking her on her legs and back, Mansoor said.

"As soon as the mob realized that Elishba was totally unconscious, they shouted that the girl was dead and fled from the scene," he said.

Elishba Aleem had rushed down from the family's third-floor apartment in Iqbal Town, Islamabad and was attacked when she pleaded for the mob to stop beating her father, who received five stitches for a hand wound. With iron rods and cricket bats, the mob also injured Mansoor's wife Aqsa and his sister-in-law Aileen George. Another of Mansoor's sons, 24-year-old Shazir Aleem, saw the assault from the apartment and also was beaten when he hurried down.

"When Shazir's wife Sanna saw that her husband was being beaten, she rushed down with [infant daughter] Hanna in her arms and pleaded with them, 'Why are you beating my husband?'" Mansoor said. "Someone in the mob snatched Hanna from Sanna and threw her on the ground, and then those beasts began beating Sanna as well."

The baby girl escaped serious injury.

Initially the assailants had attacked Mansoor as he tried to leave home with his son Shumail Aleem, whom he intended to take to police to clear up accusations by shopkeeper Muhammad Naveed that he had spoken ill of Islam.

As Mansoor reached his car, however, about a dozen men with cricket bats and metal rods got out of a parked Suzuki van and surrounded them, he said, and within 10 minutes more than 100 angry Muslims had joined Naveed, his other brothers and his father, Mogal.

"Naveed shouted, 'Why are you people looking at these choohras [derogatory term for Christians]? Catch them and kill them,'" Mansoor said. "My wife Aqsa and sister-in-law Aileen George threw their doppatas [Indian head coverings] at Naveed's and others' feet to humbly request that they not attack us, but they refused to listen. They began beating all of us with rods and cricket bats."

Area Muslims resent that the family has a car and is well-off, Mansoor said.

"They say Christians should be suppressed and kept under a tight control," he said. "They think Christians should salute them when they pass by them."

His son Shumail has been under medical treatment for schizophrenia for more than five years, he said, and because of his condition he does not work.

"As long as Shumail takes medicine, there is no one nicer than him on the earth, but if he is not taking the medicine then he is the worst creature," Mansoor said.

Mansoor's daughter, a first-year college student, received treatment at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) and eventually regained consciousness, though she remains in intense pain. Mansoor said members of the Muslim mob ensured that she did not receive a medical-legal certificate documenting her condition.

When Mansoor told Naveed and others that he would take them to court over the attack, his Muslim adversaries said he would fail because they had paid PIMS officials 50,000 rupees (US\$600) to withhold the medical report on his daughter's injuries. He said they also told him that they had paid off officers at the Shehzad Town Police Station to pressure the family to drop the case with an out-of-court settlement.

"The assistant sub-inspector, Ghulam Gilani, of Shehzad Town Police Station, called my wife and told her that if the family pursued the case of assault on us, then we would be implicated in the blasphemy case, which would have serious consequences for us," Mansoor said.

Gilani and hospital officials were not immediately available for comment.

'Blasphemy' Accusation

The comment said to have triggered the violence was uttered at a nearby general store, where Shumail Aleem had gone to buy cigarettes at about 8:30 p.m. on Dec. 28.

Dec. 28 was Islam's 10th of Muharram, or Yom-e-Ashura, when Shiite Muslims mourn the death of Hussein ibn Ali, grandson of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad. Pakistan's population is made up primarily of Sunni Muslims, who also honor the day on the claim that Moses fasted on that day to express gratitude to God for freeing the Israelites from Egypt.

At the store an elderly Christian man known as Baba Sadiq asked Shumail Aleem why movie channels were not being shown on the store's cable-fed TV.

"Shumail told him, 'Are Muslims out of their minds? Why would they show movie channels on Ashura?'" Mansoor said.

The comment apparently supported Naveed's decision to refrain from showing films on the Muslim holy day, but the shopkeeper began beating Shumail Aleem, demanding to know why he had profaned Hussein's name, Mansoor said.

Two weeks prior, Mansoor said, Naveed and his brothers had beaten a Christian boy so severely that when he bled a piece of flesh issued from his nostrils.

"Shumail had seen this all, and had protested with Naveed over this, and when he came home he was very upset over the beating and repeatedly asked his mother to go and ask Naveed about it," Mansoor said. "We think that Naveed bore a grudge because of Shumail's inquiry and protest about that beating of a Christian."

Mansoor said that after Naveed severely beat him, Shumail Aleem returned when the rest of the family was not at home, as several had taken Mansoor's 3-month-old granddaughter Hanna to the doctor. When they returned at 9:45 p.m., Mansoor said, he found several things in the house "thrown around or broken."

A neighbor told them that police and about two dozen men had come searching for Shumail Aleem – who had hid in an upper storeroom – because Naveed had accused him of blasphemy.

"We went to Naveed, who was at his shop, and inquired what had happened," Mansoor said. "He told us that Shumail had tried to steal several things from the store and also damaged several things, and worst of all that he profaned Imam Hussein. My wife told Naveed that he knew that Shumail was mentally ill so he should have waited for us, and that we would have paid the damage, but that there was no need to go to the police."

Naveed told them that whether their son was mentally ill did not matter, that he had filed a police report – which later proved to be untrue – and that they would search relentlessly for Shumail Aleem, Mansoor said.

The mob stopped pursuing members of Mansoor's family only after the intervention of Pakistan People's Party politician Malik Amir, he said, but neither police nor the hospital has cooperated with him in legal matters. An influential Muslim in the area, Raja Aftaab, is also urging the family to settle out of court, he added.

"My stance is that the entire mob that attacked us should come to our house and apologize in front of all the neighbors, and then I will start negotiations with them," he said.

Accused Pakistani Christian says Muslims tried to coerce him

Freed on bail, Naveed Masih on trial for killing Muslim in Islamist attack on Gojra

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (29.12.2009) / HRWF (30.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – A Pakistani Christian accused of killing a Muslim during the Aug. 1 Islamist attack on Christians in Gojra said he was arrested and tortured only because he was a key witness of the mob assault that left at least seven Christians burned to death.

Naveed Masih, released on bail on Wednesday (Dec. 23), told Compass that several Muslims have offered him large amounts of money to alter his testimony regarding the assault in Gojra, 50 kilometers (31 miles) from Faisalabad in Punjab Province. The mob attack, prompted by calls from Muslim clerics spreading a false rumor of "blasphemy" of the Quran, included banned Islamic terrorist groups and resulted in the looting of more than 100 houses and the burning of 50 of them; at least 19 people were injured.

Masih said one of the Muslims accused in the attack, Qadir Awan, approached him at an early court hearing and invited him to come to his house to strike a cash-for-testimony deal.

"He said that I could make lots of money because I was the witness of the ransacking, but I feared God," the 32-year-old Masih said. "Because I was not prepared to take money, he had me implicated in the counter-charges."

He said that several other Muslims contacted him in jail to tell him that they could help him.

"I told them that my brothers and sisters in Pakistan and abroad are more than enough to help me," he said. "I said, 'You take care of yourself – you people beg our brothers and sisters in the United States for aid and financial assistance to run the country, how is it that you can help me?'"

Fearing for his life now that he is out on bail, Masih said he has asked several organizations for assistance and for safe passage out of Pakistan.

"I would not be left alive if I live here in Pakistan," he said.

In counter-charges filed as a cover for accused Muslims after Christians filed charges, he said, 129 people including Bishop of Gojra John Samuel were accused in a First Information Report (FIR), yet only Masih and his brother Nauman Masih were arrested. The Faisalabad Anti-Terrorism Court released the 25-year-old Nauman Masih on bail in October.

The Lahore High Court granted bail to Naveed Masih last week after the Faisalabad Anti-Terrorism Court had denied it to him in October. Naveed Masih is accused of killing one of the assailants in the Gojra attacks, Muhammad Asif. He is said to have fired warning shots from a rooftop into the air and at the feet of the approaching Muslim mob to try to disperse them, but both brothers deny using any weapons.

The brothers gave shelter to 300 people during the attacks; they were arrested in early September initially for "rioting with deadly weapons and spreading terror with firing."

Naveed Masih said police knew the counter-charges filed by Muslims nearly two months after the Aug. 1 attack were entirely concocted, but that they arrested and tortured him anyway.

"When I was arrested, the policemen said, 'Catch this choohra [a racial slur typically used against Punjabi Christians],'" he told Compass. "They asked me which organization I belonged to, what my mission was and who had sent me on this mission."

Authorities beat him the first several days in jail, he said.

"They blindfolded me and hung me in a dark well, and sometimes I hung all night upside down without clothes," he said. "They also kept me hungry and tried to force me to

confess that some religious organization funded me to fire a weapon and instigate Muslims.”

Trial Strategies

Akbar Munawar Durrani, an attorney for the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement, said that the prosecutor in the trial has told the court that Christians were the ones who instigated Muslims by firing weapons, and that for this reason Asif died.

“I told the court,” Durrani said, “that it is strange that two days before the Aug. 1 incident, dozens of houses of Christians were burned in [nearby] Korian village, and then in this incident of Aug. 1 more than 100 houses of Christians were burned, and the prosecution keeps trumpeting this claim that Christians were the aggressors.”

Durrani said that when Lahore High Court Chief Justice Khawaja Sharif asked Investigation Officer Muhammad Aslam about his findings, Aslam told the court that if Christians hadn’t provoked Muslims then nothing would have happened. The judge asked Aslam how many Christians and how many Muslims died, Durrani said, to which the officer replied one Muslim and eight Christians.

“Still you say that Christians were the aggressors,” the judge told Aslam in a reprimanding tone.

Durrani, an executive member of the Supreme Court Bar Association, said he told the court that Masih was implicated in the killing of Asif only because he was one of two witnesses in the FIR filed against the Muslims. If Masih hadn’t defended Christians that day, he told the court, then the Christian Colony in Gojra would have suffered much more harm.

Masih said that he had learned that during the Aug. 1 attack, a member of the banned terrorist group Sipah-e-Sahaba stopped the motorbike he was riding, took gas out of it and set houses on fire.

Nauman Masih has told Compass that of the 17 Muslims named in the FIR on the Aug. 1 attack, only one, Abdul Khalid Kashmiri, was in jail. Kashmiri has offered 1 million rupees (US\$12,500) if the Christian complainants would withdraw the case, he added.

The rest of the Muslim assailants are still at large, and sources said police have no intention of arresting them.

Naveed Masih said he learned that even before he was sent to jail, inmates were murmuring that he had killed a Muslim during the mob attack.

“I told them that they only talked about the Muslim who actually came to attack and got killed, but they never mentioned eight Christians who had died during that rampage,” he said. “‘Christians are also human beings,’ I told them, ‘why don’t you count those who were killed by Muslims?’”

He said Muslim inmates often asked him “nonsense questions,” but that he always answered them sensibly.

“I am sure that the Holy Spirit helped me answering them, because once they had asked any such questions, then they never again raised such questions,” he said.

Masih said police stopped torturing him after the first several days in jail. He said he continually prayed for God to free him, as well as for all Christians who supported him and his brother through their ordeal.

Pakistani Muslims gun down Christian friend

They order him to convert to Islam or die, after accusing him of murder

By Jawad Mazhar

Compass Direct (21.12.2009) / HRWF (22.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A group of Muslims shot their Christian friend dead this month on the outskirts of this town after saying they would spare his life only if he recanted his faith, according to the young man's father.

The friends of Patras Masih, who died from gunshot wounds on Dec. 3 in Karol village, Punjab Province, issued the ultimatum to him after accusing him of the murder of their friend Anees Mahammad. An autopsy reported showed Mahammad died from toxic alcohol earlier that day.

Patras Masih's father, Gulzar Masih, said his son was at home on that day, had no contact with Mahammad, and that his friends accused him of the murder only because he refused to recant Christianity and embrace Islam.

On Dec. 1, Mahammad and three other Muslim friends of Patras Masih – Sohail Muhammad, Imran Muhammad and Amir Muhammad – had arrived with unknown Muslim men and asked Masih to help them find liquor, Gulzar Masih told Compass. Pakistani law forbids Muslims from buying or consuming alcohol. Locally brewed liquor in rural areas of Pakistan can be fatally toxic; this month 14 people died from locally brewed, toxic liquor in Pakistan's Punjab Province, news website Express India reported today.

"On that night," Gulzar Masih said, "I also heard them saying in a commanding way in the drawing room of our house, 'You [Patras Masih] ought to accept Islam and recant your faith, otherwise you and your family will be responsible for the dire consequences.'"

Patras Masih held fast to his faith, his father said; leaving with his Muslim friends, he bought them a couple of bottles of liquor and returned home.

His voice full of grief, Gulzar Masih said that on Dec. 3, his son's three Muslim friends arrived at their doorway yelling that he had killed Mahammad, and that they would spare his life only if he converted to Islam. They accused Patras Masih of serving Mahammad a toxic drink in their home the previous day.

When Patras Masih refused to recite the Islamic conversion creed, his father said, Sohail Muhammad, Imran Muhammad and Amir Muhammad sprayed bullets at his chest, killing him instantly.

"My son bravely refused to recant Christianity and clung to Christ," Gulzar Masih said, dejected but with a small smile on his face. "He bravely embraced martyrdom."

He said these same three friends on several occasions had pressured Patras Masih to convert to Islam, "but my son never accepted their invitation and always turned down their request to recant Christianity in a healthy and polite manner."

When his father asked him about his friends' Dec. 1 threats, Patras Masih told him that they often insisted that he become a Muslim. Though the young men had been friends since childhood, Gulzar Masih told his son to stop seeing them, he said.

Sternly denying that his son was capable of killing a human being., he pointed out that Patras Masih's friends accused him of serving Mahammad a toxic drink at Masih's home on Dec. 2, but that Mahammad died on Dec. 3.

"Surely it is a conspiracy against him because he refused to meet their unreasonable demands," the frail, bereaved father said. "They were ready to spare him only if he converted to Islam by reciting the holy Kalima [Islamic affirmation of faith], an emblem that one has become a Muslim."

He said that all four Muslim men had been friends of Patras Masih since childhood.

Gulzar Masih said that Ferozewala police have registered a murder case against the three suspects, but that they are all still at large and his family is vulnerable to further attacks.

Christians accused of desecrating Quran freed in Pakistan

Country's notorious 'blasphemy' law used against innocent father, daughter

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (16.12.2009) / HRWF (17.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Christian in Faisalabad district and his 20-year-old daughter were released on Monday (Dec. 14) after 14 grueling months in jail on false charges of blaspheming the Quran.

Khalil Tahir, attorney for Gulsher Masih and his daughter Ashyana Gulsher (known as Sandal), said the case was typical of the way Pakistan's blasphemy laws can be used to harass innocent Christians.

"Christians are the soft targets, and most of the people implicated in these inhumane laws are Christians," Tahir said. "We Christians are fighting for the same, noble goal - to provide justice to the victims of blasphemy laws."

Masih said that inmates beat him at least five times since he was arrested on Oct. 23, 2008. His daughter was arrested two weeks earlier, on Oct. 10.

"These long 14 months seemed like ages," Masih told Compass. "There was one inmate, Ghulam Fareed, a rich man, who always harassed me, trying to coerce me to convert to Islam by saying he would make me rich and would send me abroad."

Fareed, who also promised high quality education for Masih's children, joined with Islamic extremists jailed for terrorist acts to beat him in an effort to force him to "come into the fold of Islam," Masih said. While in jail, he said, his wife told him that their daughter had been beaten several times by the superintendent of police.

Masih and his daughter were charged under Section 295-B of the Pakistan Penal Code for blaspheming the Quran. Before charges were filed in October 2008, Masih said an initial incident occurred on Aug. 25, when Ashyana Gulsher found some burned pages of the Quran in a garbage dump outside their community of Chak No. 57, Chak Jhumra in the district of Faisalabad.

Masih said she handed the charred pages to a woman, Lubana Taj, saying, "These are the holy page of your Quran and I found them in the garbage, so you take it."

There were still some pages left, which she gave to their neighbor, Khalida Rafiq, who burned them, he said.

"She had borrowed wheat from us a few weeks ago, and when my wife demanded it back, Khalida Rafiq said that we had burned pages of the Quran and was now accusing us of taking wheat," Masih said. "Some other women of the village also accused my children of making paper airplanes of the pages of the Quran."

The escalating conflict was defused with the help of other neighbors who knew the truth, he said, and local Muslim cleric Amam Hafiz Muhammad Ali also intervened, saying Masih's daughter had done a good deed and questioning why the neighbor women were repaying her with evil.

"We thought that the matter was buried, but it arose again on Oct. 7, 2008," Masih said. On that day 20-year-old Muhammad Qasim went throughout the village on bicycle exclaiming that Christians had burned the Quran, Masih said. Upon hearing this, village landlord Rana Sarwar called Masih and told him that his children had burned the Quran and had used pages to make paper airplanes.

"I told them that I was working in Asghar Christian Colony and never knew about the incident, and the son who had been accused of blasphemy had gone to school," Masih said.

His accusers were unmoved, he said.

"In the evening when I was returning home, I heard announcements from several mosques that Christians had burned the Quran," he said. "After hearing the announcement, people began pouring in. These announcements were made by Tariq son of Hafeez, Maqbool son of Hafeez and Maulana Tawaseel Bajwa."

When Masih called emergency police, they arrested him and sent him to the Jhumra police station, Faisalabad.

"The police asked me where my children were, and when I told them that the children were in the village, the police went back to arrest them," he said. "Rana Sarwar, Wajid Khan and Rana Naeem Khan came into the police station and argued that my children had blasphemed, so why was I the one being beaten? I told Rana Sarwar in front of the police that if my children have done this, then I was ready to bear consequences."

Police told them that the crowd outside wanted to hang him and that this was why they had arrested him. Masih said that the next day Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Yousuf Zai came and asked him why he had committed blasphemy.

"Rana Sarwar then told the DSP that it was all a political ploy, and that I had been implicated in the case for voting for the opposition party," he said. "If that day those Christian Members of Parliamentary Assembly had spoken up, then the police complaint wouldn't have been registered against me."

Masih added that the station house officer felt that he was innocent but had become legally entangled due to lack of support from the community. Masih said that the next day, Oct. 8, a few Muslims gave conflicting statements against him when charges were filed.

"One said he saw me burning the pages of the Quran at 10 a.m., the other said that he saw me burning the pages at 12 p.m. and still another said that he saw me burning the pages of the Quran at 2 p.m.," he said. "When I was sent in jail, the investigation office swore that I was innocent."

In a further contradiction, the complainants accused him of cutting up pages of the Quran and tossing them in the air, not burning them, Tahir said.

The complainant in the case was Mohammad Farooq Alam, and other prosecution witnesses named were Mohammad Maqbool Ahmad and Mohammad Akber, according to Tahir.

Masih said that initially he appeared before Judge Zulfikar Lon, but that whenever a judge asked for witnesses, he was transferred.

"In this manner eight months passed, and then Judge Raja Mohammad Ghazanfar came" and refused to be transferred, Masih said.

After Tahir's cross-examination of witnesses, Ghazanfar dropped all charges and ordered their release.

"During cross examination, I proved that the whole case was concocted, frivolous, fake and that the charges against the accused Christian brother were unfounded," Tahir said.

Tahir said that he had provided only legal assistance to the victims, with Johnson Michael, chairman of the Bishop John Joseph Shaheed Trust, providing paralegal assistance. An MPA in the Punjab Parliament, Tahir is the body's secretary for Human Rights and Minority Affairs and also serves as executive director of advocacy group Action Against Discriminatory Laws Trust Pakistan.

Pakistani Muslims allegedly poison Christian employees to death

Two brothers die, third in critical condition, after complaining they were not paid

By Jawad Mazhar

Compass Direct (15.12.2009) / HRWF (16.12.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Muslim employers of three Christian sanitation workers at a banquet/wedding hall here allegedly poisoned the three workers yesterday, killing two of them; at press time the third was struggling for life in intensive care.

The father of the three workers, Yousaf Masih, said the owner of the hall, along with the manager, poisoned his sons because they were Christians who had dared to ask for pay owed to them.

Imran Masih, 29, and Irfan Masih, 25, died at the Ferozewala Pul Banquet & Marriage Hall after being forced to drink something that was heavily poisoned, Yousaf Masih said. The third worker, 23-year-old Aakash Masih, was in critical condition at the Intensive Care Unit of Civil Hospital Gujranwala, in Punjab Province.

"It appears from the position they were in that they were forced to consume some kind of poisoned drink, or a drug, and they were left there to die," Yousaf Masih said. "The administration of the banquet and wedding hall did not call a hospital or take them to a hospital -instead they called us after the death of two of our loved ones."

The Peoples Colony police station has registered a murder and deception case against Imtiyas Warriach, owner of the Ferozewala Pul Banquet & Marriage Hall, and hall manager Abid Virk. At press time they remained at large.

The chief of the Peoples Colony police station was not available for comment, but an officer told Compass that the two suspects would be arrested soon.

The family learned of the deaths when another of Yousaf Masih's sons, 21-year-old Javed Masih, received a telephone call at home from the owner, Warriach, saying that his older brother Imran Masih was lying dead on the floor of the wedding hall.

Because they had not been paid, the three brothers had left the hall to work elsewhere before returning this past weekend. Javed Masih said he spoke by telephone on Friday (Dec. 11) with Warriach, when the owner called asking for his three brothers to return to work.

"The owner and manager of the wedding hall called me in the early morning of Dec. 11 and pleaded for my three brothers to rejoin and start working," Javed Masih said. "They promised to reimburse their previous outstanding wages, as well as pay them a Christmas bonus and overtime. At this my brothers agreed and went to work the next morning."

When Yousaf and Javed Masih were summoned to the wedding hall yesterday, they found Imran Masih and Irfan Masih dead. Aakash Masih was alive but lying still on the floor, they said.

Yousaf Masih said his sons had long told him that owner Warriach and manager Virk refused to pay their daily wages, and that the managers and staff members at the hall spoke derogatorily to them for being Christians.

"On demand of their daily wages, the owner and manager had threatened them that they would continue to work without payment or face the dire consequences," Yousaf Masih said. "After my sons rejoined as sanitation workers, both Warriach and Virk started to make fun of them for leaving the job previously. Both the Muslim men mocked my sons for being Christian and called them by pejorative names such as 'Choohra.'"

Yousaf Masih, 47, told Compass at the Sargodha offices of human rights group Rays of Development Organization that his sons had worked at the same wedding hall since the day it opened in 2005. Sobbing, he said that the owner and manager had never paid them their full wages during that time, so they had begun looking for other work a few weeks before the Islamic festival of sacrifice, called Eid-ul-Azha.

Muslims refrain from marrying during the Islamic month of Muharram, so in the small window of time between the start of that month and the end of the Eid-ul-Azha festival, wedding halls thrive and require all available help, he said.

Javed Masih said the bodies of Imran Masih and Irfan Masih were moved to the morgue at Civil Hospital Gujranwala for autopsy.

Pakistani Christian on run from Taliban death threat

Islamic extremist sermonizing leads to altercation at barbershop in South Waziristan

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (27.11.2009) / HRWF (28.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A young Christian man is in hiding in Pakistan from Taliban militants who seek to kill him for "blasphemy" because he defended his faith.

In February Jehanzaib Asher, 22, was working in a barbershop his family jointly owns with his cousin in Wana, South Waziristan - a Taliban stronghold in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan's northwest - when the Islamic militants showed up to try to convert him to Islam.

It was not the first time the Taliban's Noor Hassan had delivered strident sermons to him and his relatives, and this time Asher decided not to listen silently. He defended Christianity by citing verses from the Bible, and Hassan and another Islamic militant viciously beat him - breaking his left leg and some ribs and leaving his left hand non-functional.

He told Compass that he only defended Christianity and did not comment on Islam.

"One can bear the death of one's father or mother, but can we keep listening to insults of our religion?" Asher said.

Nearby Muslims helped him and two cousins ward off the attack. Soon the Taliban militants began spreading the word to local residents that Asher and his cousin Christopher Masih had blasphemed Muhammad, the prophet of Islam.

Before the Pakistani military's recent offensive against the Taliban stronghold in South Waziristan, Asher said, his picture was posted at check-points in an attempt to help the Taliban and other Islamists identify and kill him.

Asher's cousin, Zaib Masih, managed to get Asher and Christopher Masih (Zaib Masih's brother) into a vehicle, and they fled the market area where their two barbershops are located. As barbers they were targeted for the Islamic sermonizing and attack due to the Taliban's opposition to shaving of beards, he said.

Zaib Masih told Compass that Christopher Masih was also injured in the attack, though not as seriously as Asher. They took Asher to a military hospital, safe from the Taliban. But when military doctors asked how Asher became so badly injured, they mentioned only a "family fight" so as not to draw the ire of any Muslim soldiers who might attack them for the blasphemy allegations.

For months Asher remained at home; even neighbors were unaware of the fact that he was still in Wana, Zaib Masih said.

"We live in the army compound, but we still feared that the Taliban might tip off some one in the compound, and we might be attacked on the allegations of blasphemy," he said.

He said that they had been born and brought up in Wana and knew many Taliban members, and with their help he approach a grand mufti to try to obtain a decree that Asher was innocent.

"I took along a lamb with me to present to the mufti in order to appease his anger, but he listened to no word and wanted to know Asher's whereabouts," Zaib Masih added.

Asher still walked with a limp, and the Taliban were determined to kill him, Zaib Masih said. His and Asher's families own a house in Sialkot, and Zaib Masih said he planned to sneak him there.

Asher said the grand mufti was not present when the Taliban initially sought to kill him, and that therefore no fatwa was issued ordering his death.

"If that had happened, then I would have been killed for sure," he said. "The Taliban were even killing the army personnel, so what capacity did we have to defend ourselves?"

Earlier this month, Asher told Compass, he disguised himself as a Muslim with a long beard and left Wana.

Initially he fled to Sialkot, Punjab Province. Soon he learned that in Wana news of his departure had spread, and that there was a rumor that three Taliban had been dispatched to Sialkot to hunt him down. Crestfallen, he fled to another, undisclosed city.

Asher told Compass that he had recovered from all injuries except for his knee, which remained swollen. He said he was receiving treatment for it at a hospital.

"Only God could have saved me from this calamity," he said. "Otherwise, no one could save me from their hands."

The cousins' barbershops in Wana have been closed after the encounter with the Taliban. Zaib Masih said that two relatives have government jobs as janitors, and the two families are surviving on their meager salaries.

Since the closing of their barbershops, Zaib Masih said, the families have living hand-to-mouth – barely able to have two meals a day.

South Waziristan is the headquarters of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, the Taliban umbrella group fighting the government, and is a hub of Arab and Uzbek Islamic militants. In mid-October the Pakistani Army launched an offensive after the Taliban managed to take the army's general headquarters in Rawalpindi.

Pakistan's Islamic political parties warn government not to amend blasphemy law

ICC (03.11.2009) / HRWF (06.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – International Christian Concern has learned that on October 31, two prominent Islamic political parties warned the government of Pakistan not to amend or repeal the blasphemy law. The law has been a major cause of violence against Christians.

According to The Daily Times, Jamaat Ahl-e-Hadith Pakistan and the Tehreek Tahafuz-e-Haqooq Ahl-e-Sunnat, mainstream political parties with large supporters, threatened to call for protests if the law is altered. The Daily Times quoted Hafiz Abdul Guffar Ropari, the leader of Jamaat Ahl-e-Hadith Pakistan, as saying that the government of Pakistan must not amend the law "if it wants to remain in power."

Pakistan's blasphemy stipulates that defaming the Islamic prophet Mohammed or desecrating the Qur'an is punishable by death and life imprisonment respectively.

Muslims have used the law to repeatedly incite violence against Christians. In August, a Muslim mob killed 11 Christians and burned down over 40 Christian homes following false allegation of desecration of the Qur'an in the Pakistani city of Gojra.

Muslims also have been the victims of the blasphemy law. According to the State Department's report on International Religious Freedom, in 2008 alone, 17 Muslims and 25 Ahmedis were arrested for allegedly violating the blasphemy law.

ICC's Regional Manager for Africa and South Asia, Jonathan Racho said "It's unfortunate that political parties stand in the way of repealing the blasphemy law which has been misused against Christians, Muslims, and Ahmedis. We urge the government of Pakistan to end the misuse of blasphemy laws by repealing it once and for all."

Pakistan police torture Christians arrested in Islamic attack

Two brothers jailed after protecting 300 people from Islamist fire assault in Gojra

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (23.10.2009) / HRWF (26.10.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Two Christians in Gojra, Pakistan who allegedly fired warning shots as an Islamist mob approached that burned seven Christians to death on Aug. 1 told Compass they were tortured after police arrested them.

Only one of hundreds of Muslim assailants in the fire assault on Gojra's Christian Town is in jail, but sources said Islamists have provided police a pretense for arresting the two Christian brothers who gave shelter to 300 people. Naveed Masih, 32, alias Fauji ("the Soldier") and his 25-year-old brother Nauman Masih were arrested on Sept. 2 and Sept. 7 respectively for "rioting with deadly weapons and spreading terror with firing."

Naveed Masih is said to have fired warning shots from a rooftop into the air and at the feet of the mob of approaching Muslim assailants to try to disperse them, but both brothers deny using any weapons.

From his jail cell, Naveed Masih told Compass that he and his brother were taken to the Police Training Centre in Choong, where they were kept in illegal detention for 18 days and were tortured "in so many ways ruthlessly and in inhumane ways."

"Sometimes we were not given anything to eat or drink except one time, and sometimes we were hung in a dark well while our faces were covered with a cloth," Naveed Masih said. "They beat me with cane sticks on the back of my hands and sometimes hung me upside down and then brutally beat me."

Police kept them hungry for days, he said; when they asked for food, officers told them to confess that they had fired, he added. Naveed Masih said police tortured them to try to force them to say they had links with terrorist organizations that provided arms and ammunition to them.

Naveed Masih said they were forbidden to sleep; they were awoken whenever they dozed off. Throughout the 18 days of torture, he said, the two brothers were kept separate but saw each other when they were taken to court.

"We hugged each other and wept, seeing each other's wounds," he said.

Naveed Masih said police tortured them because they had given shelter to more than 300 women, children and elderly people on the day of attack, in which the assailants - acting on an unsubstantiated rumor of "blasphemy" of the Quran and whipped into a frenzy by

local imams and banned terrorist groups – also looted more than 100 houses and set fire to 50 of them. At least 19 people were injured in the melee.

In spite of the targeting of the Christian area in Gojra by hundreds of Islamic extremists, police have registered complaints filed by the Muslim assailants against 129 Christians; sources said these various charges were filed only to pressure the Christian community. Thus far police have arrested only Naveed Masih and Nauman Masih – whose cases were submitted in an Anti-Terrorism Court to make it difficult for them to obtain bail, according to their lawyer – but the Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance and Settlement was able to obtain release on bail for Nauman Masih.

Nauman Masih told Compass that of the 17 Muslims named in the First Information Report on the Aug. 1 attack, only one, Abdul Khalid Kashmiri, was in jail. Kashmiri has offered 1 million rupees (US\$12,500) if the Christian complainants would withdraw the case, Nauman Masih added.

The rest of the Muslim assailants are still at large, and sources said police have no intention of arresting them. In addition, three checks of 100,000 rupees (US\$1,200) each issued by Punjab Provincial Law Minister Rana Sanaullah for compensation to victims have been cancelled, Nauman Masih said, probably because the recipients are among the 129 Christians implicated in the false charges.

Nauman Masih said that when his mother arrived at the Christian Town Police Station the night his brother was arrested, officials told her that she could see him the next morning. But when she and other women arrived the next morning, he said, police told them that they had not arrested him.

The Community Development Initiative (CDI), an advocacy group working with the help of American Center for Law and Justice, has taken up the case of both brothers. CDI lawyer Haroon Suleman Khokhar said that they have been falsely implicated in a serious crime for protecting themselves and many other innocent Christians.

He said that police had no justification for submitting the cases of the two brothers in the Anti-Terrorism Court of Faisalabad. Khokhar said Naveed Masih was a key eyewitness in the report filed with police on the Aug. 1 attack, and that the two brothers were implicated in the cases only to try coercing Naveed Masih to withdraw from testifying against the Muslim attackers.

To protest police registration of the complaints against the 129 Christians, which include Bishop of Gojra John Samuel, Naveed Masih and Nauman Masih, on Oct. 5 the Christians of Gojra rejected goods sent by the U.S. Embassy to Pakistan in Islamabad. Demanding justice rather than aid, the Christians threw away the boxes of aid.

Islamists Attack Pakistani Christian Family For Refusing to Convert

ICC (06.10.2009) / HRWF (07.10.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that on September 28, Islamists attacked the home of a Christian family for refusing to convert to Islam in Murree, a town near the Pakistan capital of Islamabad.

Rafiq Mashi Bhatti and his family had lived in peace and harmony with their Muslim neighbors for years. However, in the past few months, they received anonymous phone calls and letters warning them to convert to Islam, leave their home or die.

The threatening letters were inscribed with verses from the Qur'an, including Sura 5: 51 which reads, "O ye who believe! take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends..."

In one of the letters, the Christian family was told, "You Christians are agents of US led forces...Therefore it is our religious duty to wipe out all Christians from Islamic Holy land of Pakistan."

The family reported the death threats to the police but the police were unable to prevent the attack. The police are investigating the attack but the unknown assailants remain at large.

ICC's Jonathan Racho said, "This latest attack once again highlights the insecurity that Pakistani Christians are living with. Despite promises to protect Christians, they continue to face attacks in Pakistan. We urge Pakistan to fully investigate the attack against Rafiq and his family and bring the perpetrators to justice. We call upon Pakistani police to protect Rafiq and his family from further violence."

Pakistan grants bail to 13 Muslims accused of carnage against Christians

ICC (17.09.2009) / HRWF (18.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that on September 7, a Pakistani court granted bail to 13 Muslims, including radical clerics who incited mob attacks against Christians, that resulted in 11 Christians being killed and over 40 Christians homes being burned down in Gojra.

Chief Justices Khawaja Muhammad Sharif and Ijaz Ahmed Chaudhary of the Lahore High court decided to grant the bail to the following: Bashir Ahmad Shah, Muhammad Ahmad Shah, Muhammad Abid, Kaleem Ullah, Touqir Ahmed, Muhammad Yaqoob, Sajid Farooqi, Qari Majid Farooqi, Saeed Afzal, Rizwan Akram, Amer Hayyat and Muhammad Rehman.

On August 1, 2009, a Muslim mob estimated at 3000 assaulted Christians in Gojra after radical Muslim clerics accused the Christians of blasphemy and called for the attacks. For a detail story on the attacks, please go to: <http://www.persecution.org/suffering/pressdetail.php?presscode=322>.

ICC's Jonathan Racho said, "We condemn in strongest terms the decision by the Lahore High Court to release the individuals responsible for the carnage in Gojra. Pakistan has repeatedly failed to bring perpetrators of violence against Christians to justice, and this latest decision helps to perpetuate a culture of impunity in Pakistan. We urge Pakistan to arrest all individuals responsible for the attacks against Christians. We also ask the government Pakistan to repeal blasphemy laws that are fueling violence against Christians."

ICC urges all concerned parties to sign the petition that calls for repeal of blasphemy laws in Pakistan. To read and sign the petition, please go to: <http://tinypetition.com/RepealBlasphemyLaw>.

Please contact the Embassy of Pakistan in your country and tell them you are opposed to their decision to release the fanatics on bail.

Pakistani Embassies:
USA: (202) 243-6500
Canada: (613) 238-7881
UK: 0870-005-6967

Police in Pakistan shoot mourners at funeral of Christian

Authorities allegedly kill young man in custody on contrived charge of desecrating Quran

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (17.09.2009) / HRWF (18.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - At a funeral for a Christian man allegedly tortured to death while in custody on a spurious charge of blaspheming the Quran, police in Sialkot, Pakistan yesterday fired on mourners trying to move the coffin to another site.

Area Christians suspect police killed 22-year-old Robert Danish, nicknamed "Fanish" or "Falish" by friends, by torturing him to death on Tuesday (Sept. 15) after the mother of his Muslim girlfriend contrived a charge against him of desecrating Islam's scripture. The allegation led to calls from mosque loudspeakers to punish Christians, prompting an Islamic mob to attack a church building in Jathikai village on Friday (Sept. 11) and beat several of the 30 families forced to flee their homes.

Jathikai was Danish's native village, and some family members and other Christians wished to transfer his coffin to his hometown. Eyewitnesses at the funeral in Christian Town, Sialkot, said police fired shots directly at the Christians, injuring three, when mourners began to move the coffin toward nearby Jathikai. Mourners fled.

Sialkot is 125 kilometers (78 miles) northwest of Lahore in Punjab Province.

Controversy swirled around the cause of Danish's death, with Christians refusing to accept police claims that he committed suicide. Results of forensic tests are expected within a week.

The dark moment for Danish's family grew gloomier yesterday when police seemed to be seeking the first excuse for heavy-handed tactics at the funeral attended by hundreds of people, Christian sources said. When the family and other Christians tried to take the coffin to his hometown of Jathikai, police fired on them, charged them with batons and snatched the body from them, Christian sources said.

Eyewitness Sajawal Masih told Compass that as soon as mourners lifted the coffin, police began firing tear gas.

"We were running when police opened fire and one bullet went through my foot, and two others also were injured," he said.

There were reports of Christian youths pelting officers with stones, and police reportedly said that they needed to rush the crowd and make arrests to prevent "further disturbances."

On Tuesday night (Sept. 15), Danish's survivors and other Christians had decided that the body would be buried in Christian Town because of the dangers of potential attack in Jathikai, according to Christian Town Councilor Tanveer Saqib. Saqib said that the funeral was to be held at 10 a.m. on Wednesday (Sept. 16) at the Christian Technical Institute (CTI) Ground in Christian Town, Sialkot city.

Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) Member of National Assembly (MNA) Akram Gill said that when he and several youths took the body from the CTI Ground and began

heading toward Jathikai village, police began firing. Gill told Compass that police opened fire on them as well as the crowd, injuring three Christians.

Gill, a Christian, added that police also shot tear gas, and that officers arrested about 100 Christians. The national assembly member said police arrested him and took Danish's body to the Christian Town Graveyard in Sialkot. In spite of the tear gas, Gill said, he and others went to the graveyard but encountered armed police who also fired tear gas, turning them back.

For three hours, Gill said, Criminal Investigation Department police detained him, and although he was released, police arrested PML-Q Member of Provincial Assembly (MPA) Shehzad Elahi and his whereabouts were still unknown. He said that whenever Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) members come into power in the province, problems for Christians multiply.

Cause of Death

How Danish died remained unclear. Allama Iqbal Hospital Deputy Medical Superintendent Sajid Hussein told Compass that on Danish's body there was a large welt on the back of the neck and "marks on the legs and back." He said it was too soon to determine cause of death but that police had pronounced it a suicide.

Tissues taken from the body have been sent to Lahore for chemical and histopathology tests. He said these tests would indicate how the wounds were made, including whether they were inflicted after death.

"The report of these tests would come within a week, and I would inform the media of its findings," he said. "I cannot comment on whether he committed suicide or not, as the matter is before the court."

There were unconfirmed reports that state officials were pressuring doctors at Allama Iqbal Hospital to declare Danish's death a suicide; Hussein denied these statements, telling Compass that they were "mere rumors."

Hussein said that two Christian doctors, one from Bethania Hospital and the medical superintendent of Jalalpur Jattan Mission Hospital, were allowed to observe the autopsy. Christian Town Councilor Tanveer Saqib said that after the autopsy, the two Christian doctors came out and told media in front of thousands of Christians that Danish had been tortured to death.

Saqib said Danish's father received the body and, accompanied by thousands of Christians, took it to Baithania Mission Hospital. The procession was so big that it took nearly four hours, though the route was not far.

Over the weekend Danish's father had been unduly arrested, and upon his release a station house officer told Danish's uncle, Saleem Masih, that even though Danish's father was being released, Danish never would be. Saleem Masih told Compass that Danish's father went back to his jailed son and told him, "My son, we have been trying our best to save you, but it doesn't seem we will succeed. I think it is the last time I'm seeing you, so I commit you in the Lord's hands."

Councilor Saqib said that a Christian constable posted at the Sialkot District Jail told him that he saw Danish in the jail at around 7 a.m. and that he appeared unharmed. At about 10 a.m., however, jail administrators called important figures in the Christian community and told them that Danish had committed suicide, Saqib said.

Danish's body was taken to a trauma center for a CT scan, he said, then to Riffat Idrees Hospital for an MRI.

"Along with the body were two Christian doctors – Dr. Tariq Malik and Dr. Qammar Sohail –and we were confident that they would tell the facts," he said, adding that Malik had all medical reports of these tests.

The Punjab provincial government has ordered an investigation into the death, and three prison officials have reportedly been suspended.

Tragic Love

A paternal cousin of Danish identified only as Parveen confirmed reports that the conflict grew out of a romantic relationship between Danish and Hina Asghar, a young Muslim woman. She said Danish and Asghar were neighbors and had been seeing each other for three or four years.

On the night of Sept. 10, Parveen told Compass, Danish and Asghar met on the roof, angering the young Muslim's mother. Early the next morning, Asghar's mother spoke of the affair with the wife of local Muslim cleric identified only as Amanullah; the cleric's wife in turn warned Asghar that both she and Danish could lose their lives if the relationship continued, Parveen said.

When Danish met Asghar on the road the next morning, Parveen said, the young Muslim woman refused to talk to him but tried to hand him a letter explaining the warning she had received. Upset, Danish batted her hand away as she was trying to give him the letter.

"Because he pushed her hand with a jerk, supara 21 [a section of the Quran larger than a sura, or chapter] fell from her hand and dropped onto a nearby sewage stream and got smeared with garbage," Parveen said.

Saleem Masih, Danish's uncle, questions that what fell from Asghar's hand was a part of the Quran. He told Compass that Asghar was trying to give Danish a green-colored diary that only looked like the similarly green-covered section of the Quran. After the rumor began circulating that Danish had blasphemed the Quran, Saleem Masih said, Danish told his mother that it was not the Quran but a green diary that Asghar was trying to give him which fell.

According to Parveen, Asghar returned home and began cleaning the recovered scripture part, and her mother asked how it became sullied, Parveen said. Asghar's mother subsequently rushed to cleric Amanullah's wife, who then told her husband about the incident.

Saleem Masih told Compass that he and his wife, along with Danish's parents, went to Hina Asghar's father, Asghar Ali, bowed before him and pleaded for him to stop the false rumors of desecration of the Quran. He responded that Muslim cleric Amanullah would decide on it after the Friday prayers, and that the matter was not in their hands anymore.

On that day, Sept. 11, at about 11 a.m., the Muslim cleric announced during the Friday prayer that a Christian had blasphemed by desecrating the Quran, Parveen said.

Islamic mobs brandishing sticks were already arriving in the village, shouting against Danish and demanding that he be hung to death. They also occupied a house that he owned. Surrounding families fled their homes, leaving domestic animals without food and water.

Relatives Thrashed

Nadeem Masih, a paternal cousin of Danish, said that when he arrived at the village by motorbike that day, a large number of emotionally charged Muslims were setting Calvary Church on fire.

He said several Muslims had surrounded Danish's father, Riasat Masih, and that he managed to get his uncle onto his motorbike to try to escape. They sped through several mob attempts to stop them and were eventually pursued by two Muslims on motorcycles. As Nadeem and Riasat Masih entered the main road, their motorbike slid and fell as they barely avoided an approaching truck. Nadeem Masih escaped but his uncle, Danish's father, was captured.

Saleem Masih said that the Muslim mob took hold of Danish's father, tied him up and were about to set him on fire when elderly men intervened, saying punishment for that crime would be too great, and suggested they instead only beat him. After beating Danish's father, the Muslim mob untied him and took him into the church, where they burned Bibles, hymn books and other items and continued beating him.

Christian sources said police arrived and arrested Riasat Masih – not his attackers – and took him to the police station. Riasat Masih filed a crime report against the jailor and police officials at the Civil Lines Police Station, according to Christian Town Councilor Saqib.

Saleem Masih told Compass that he also was beaten. He said he was with Calvary Church Senior Pastor Dilshad Masih when they arrived in the village to find the mob setting church articles on fire and striking it with whatever they could find on hand. Realizing he could do nothing, Saleem Masih said he ran to his farmhouse, also owned by a Muslim named Bao Munir.

Munir took hold of him, he said.

"He brought out my cot and other belongings and set them on fire, and then he also tried to burn me in this fire," Saleem Masih said.

Munir told him he could either be burned or go with him back to the village, and he forced all of the Christian's clothes off of him except a cloth covering his loins and burned them, Saleem Masih said. After some struggle, he said, he managed to escape.

Danish, meantime, was hiding in a house in Jathikai village but was arrested the next morning (Sept. 12) when he went out for drinking water.

Tensions escalated, a source told Compass, when cleric Sabir Ali announced from his mosque in nearby Bhopalwala village that a Christian boy had blasphemed Islam by throwing the Quran in a drain.

Church Fire

After Calvary Church was set on fire, about 30 nearby families fled from the brutal beatings. Eyewitnesses told Compass that the assailants first went to Danish's house. Not finding anyone there, they attacked the locked church which was only three houses from his.

The eyewitnesses, who were still in hiding and fearing further attacks, said that the assailants burned Bibles and hymnbooks. The assailants brought the church cross out,

they said, and beat it with their shoes. The sources said the attackers were mainly from Shabab-e-Milli, a wing of the Muslim extremist Jamaat-e-Islami.

Christian Town Councilor Saqib said that the mob got hold of Calvary Church Senior Pastor Masih and severely beat him while police stood by. Police kept Saqib and his team from going to the blazing Calvary Church building, signaling them from afar not to come near, he said. He added that they had to turn back as the rampaging Muslims turned on them to attack, which police made no effort to stop.

Pastor Masih told Compass that when he and Saleem Masih arrived at the church building, Muslims shouted at them, "Catch these Christians!" He remained standing as others fled, he said, and the mob beat him and took his mobile phone.

"They wanted to kill me, but miraculously I managed to run from there," he said.

Saqib said MPA Kamran Michael of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PLM-N), the ruling party in Punjab province, reached the village on Friday, but police did not allow him to go to the burning church, citing security threats. About 500 Christians later gathered in Sialkot to protest the church fire, with Michael addressing the crowd.

Michael said that one of the protestors reminded him that after Islamic mobs burned homes in Gojra last month, he had vowed to resign if further attacks took place. The crowd then began demanding that he resign, and police opened fire and charged the crowd with batons. He added that throughout the incident there were several media vans, but none of the major television stations covered the protest.

Several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Christian media also faced difficulties in getting in the village, though in all previous incidents media and NGOs were allowed access. In this case, however, police told them that they were not allowed due to security reasons. Also unable to gain access to Jathikai was Pakistan People's Party provincial Assembly Member Amna Buttar and minority rights groups.

George and Butta Masih, along with four family members, were in Jathikai tending to their five cows on Sunday (Sept. 13). George Masih told a Compass reporter who had somehow got into the village that they stayed home all day and went out only at night to bring some fodder for the animals. They said that Muslims would beat any Christians seen during the day.

On Sunday about 500 to 700 Muslim women staged a protest in Sialkot to refute the notion that a Muslim woman could fall in love with a Christian man.

Several Christian and secular organizations in Lahore have scheduled a candle-light vigil today (Sept. 17) as a memorial for Danish and other members of Pakistan's minority communities who have been killed or attacked in Islamist attacks.

A field officer for advocacy group Community Development Initiative, Napoleon Qayyum, said such attacks were weakening the Christian community.

"After the Gojra incident, several Christians said that their Muslim employers had told them not to come to work anymore," Qayyum said. "This economic dependence further plays part in seeking justice."

He added that in the June 30 Islamist attack on Bahmaniwala, in Kasur district, Christians did not want to pursue justice as they worked on Muslims' land and could not afford confrontation.

"Their fear is that they would be left without jobs," he said. "Due to economic dependence and poor status, Christians neither pursue their cases, nor do they defend themselves in such instances."

Witnesses killed within prison walls: a Christian boy is accused of blasphemy and murdered

AHRC (16.09.2009) / HRWF (16.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The criminal nexus between Pakistan's government administration, police and Muslim fundamentalist organizations has once again brought to the limelight in the extra-judicial torture and killing of a Christian boy following a hate campaign against Christians in Jethki village, Sialkot district, Punjab province on September 11. Please refer to our previous AHRC statement: <http://www.ahrchk.net/statements/mainfile.php/2009statements/2224/>.

The killing of Mr. Fanish Maseeh (20) starkly exposes the collusion between the local authorities with, on one hand, the police, and on the other Muslim fundamentalists, who wish to prevent independent enquiries into their false allegations of blasphemy made against Maseeh and four other Christians. It appears that they were concerned that Maseeh (an important witness to the cause of the Jethki riot) would reveal their crimes if he remained alive. According to credible sources, the accusation of blasphemy made against Maseeh was merely a pretext to arrest the young victim, who had allegedly been developing a romantic relationship with a Muslim girl. The relationship was bitterly opposed by the girl's family and religious radicals in the community.

Mr. Maseeh, accused of blasphemy by the same Muslim clerics who instigated the Jethki riot, was allegedly tortured and killed extra-judicially in the Sialkot prison yesterday, on September 15. His body was found just three days after he turned himself over to police in exchange for the release of his father, Mr. Rehmat Maseeh (50), who had been illegally booked and kept hostage by the police since the day of the riot. The police have alleged that Maseeh committed suicide in prison. However witnesses have testified to the contrary, noting that there were no marks of strangulation on his neck and that the body was covered with injuries that plausibly resulted from torture.

The AHRC is appalled by the extent to which the religious leaders are willing to go to, to cover up the truth. The violence inflicted upon Maseeh demonstrates recklessness, and confidence in their own impunity; the compliance of the police is a painful indication of how powerless of law enforcement agencies have become before influential social groups. These - among them various Islamic fundamentalist organizations - are virtually operating above the law, and appear able to intervene in judicial processes with relative ease.

This impunity also emphasizes the extreme vulnerability of religious minorities in Pakistan, particularly in Punjab. This latest case indicates that the government is both unwilling and unable to provide basic security to religious minorities in prison.

The AHRC strongly condemns the extra-judicial killing of witnesses by police officers in Sialkot, and urges the government to begin an immediate independent investigation. The police officers suspected of involvement in Maseeh's torture and murder must be suspended from work until the investigation is completed, and the Muslim leaders who made false accusations and incited violence against Christians (using mosque loud speakers) must be convicted to deter such practices in future. The AHRC urges the Pakistani government to ensure that law enforcement agencies extract themselves from the grip of political and religious organisations for the sake of expediency, to the continual, often fatal detriment of civilians.

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Political expediency of the government is putting the lives of religious minorities at stake

AHRC (15.09.2009) / HRWF (16.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) is deeply concerned about the uncontrolled violence against religious minorities in various districts of Punjab province, instigated by fundamentalist Muslim groups and religious leaders who illegally use mosque loud speakers to provoke Muslim folks to attack the settlements of religious minorities. The situation has dramatically worsened after the formation of the provincial government of the PML-N, which has a record of intolerant policies against Christians and Ahmedis in particular. The continuous persecution, thriving on the reluctance of the federal government to provide minorities protection and repeal the notorious blasphemy laws, is putting the lives of many at stake.

One month after the Gojra tragedy, another case of collective violence took place on September 11 in the village of Jethki, Sambrial tehsil of Sialkot district, where a mob armed with bricks, stones and batons gathered outside the Kalwari Church after the Juma prayer (Friday noon prayer) and attacked Christian visitors, causing serious injuries to a senior pastor, Dilshad. The mob ransacked the church and set it ablaze along with two neighboring houses that belong to Christians by pouring petrol and kerosene oil on the buildings.

The mob was answering to their religious leaders' call to "teach Christians a lesson", after the clerics used the loud speakers to accuse five Christian boys of desecrating the Holy Quran and committing blasphemy. The allegation is nevertheless highly suspicious -- according to credible sources, the case originated from a harassment complaint reported by a Muslim girl against a Christian boy, but was exploited by Muslim clerics who inflated it into a case of blasphemy.

This latest incident is the fourth of its kind within the last three months and highlights the alarming frequency with which the blasphemy law is blatantly misused by Muslim leaders to provoke collective violence against religious minorities. The incident is reminiscent of the Gojra carnage of August 1, in which three thousand violent Muslim protestors destroyed 140 houses, two churches and burnt seven Christians alive, including two children aged 6 and 13. As in Gojra, the Christian residents of Jethki are forced to flee for their lives and to find resettlement at other places.

These instigated acts of hostility are not random outbursts but suggest a greater conspiracy: Mosque leaders are exploiting the religious sentiments of Muslim folks to chase Christians away in order to occupy land owned by the latter. Many of these mosque leaders receive bribes from land-grabbers in the National and Provincial Assemblies and are hired by them to expropriate land using more discreet methods. It is therefore no surprise that these cases of violence have taken place in cities and villages where land has grown in commercial value. After the Christian residents departed, mosque leaders usually arranged for people to start building houses and other construction projects to occupy the land.

After the Jethki riot, the police did not launch an investigation although a first information report (FIR) has been lodged against the instigators of violence, nor did it

arrest the clerics who violated Section 3 of Loud Speaker Act 1965 which bans all types of speech other than Azan (the call to prayer) and Khutba (the Friday sermon in Arabic). Instead, the District Police Officer (DPO) Sialkot Waqar Ahmad Chohan "negotiated" with Muslim party leaders and promised to arrest the Christians accused of blasphemy within a 24-hour deadline.

The blasphemy law was introduced by General Zia ul Haq (1977-88) and was amended in 2004 to prevent its widespread misuse against minorities, requiring police officers to produce substantial evidence before arrests are made. However, the vague formulation of the law and arbitrary enforcement by the police -- as in this case -- still lends ample room to manipulation. According to data collected by the National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP), at least 964 persons were alleged under the blasphemy law from 1986 to August 2009.

The AHRC is aware of Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani's announcement in August that a committee will be formed to discuss "laws detrimental to religious harmony" and work to improve them. However, the government has only conceded to weak "procedural changes" without fundamentally altering the very laws that are directly responsible for legitimizing religious violence. Many Islamic provisions of the country's Constitution, such as those declaring that sovereignty belongs to Allah and that all laws would be interpreted in the light of Quran and Sunnah, effectively hand religious leaders the formidable power to interpret and apply the law according to their will.

The AHRC has repeatedly called for the repeal of the blasphemy laws by the Pakistani government and for responsible enforcement of the Loud Speaker Act 1965 by the police. Their failure to arrest those who fabricated charges of blasphemy and those who instigated collective violence by using mosque loud speakers is encouraging similar incidents to take place one after another, threatening the safety and security of religious minorities while eroding confidence in the country's law system. The AHRC strongly urges the government to intervene to prevent further abuse of religious authority for the sake of political expediency and to offer immediate protection to minorities who are forced to leave their homes as a result of religious violence.

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Christians in Pakistan fear further firestorms

Cooperation among police, Muslim and Christian leaders stave off religious brushfires

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (08.09.2009) / HRWF (09.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - In the wake of Islamists setting fires that killed at least seven people in Punjab Province last month, the latest of several attempts to provoke further attacks on Christians took place in a village on Friday (Sept. 4) when unidentified men tore pages of the Quran and left them at a church.

Police said they were able to cool tensions in Chak 8-11-L Mission Village, near Chichawatni, after the torn pages of the Muslim scriptures were left at the Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church and on a nearby road. Sources said they have witnessed similar attempts to ignite attacks on Christians in several areas of Punjab Province since

an Islamic mob on Aug. 1 burned seven Christians alive in Gojra over a false accusation of blaspheming the Quran.

Superintendent of Police Ahmed Nawaz Cheema said the pages of the Quran were left at the dividing line between Chak 8's Christian-inhabited Mission village and the Muslim-populated Maliks village, indicating "it was planted to create tensions between the two villages."

Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church Pastor Salmoon Ejaz told Compass that Muslim women on their way to glean cotton early in the morning had found the torn pages of the Quran. They took the pages to local Muslim clerics, who in turn took them to the police. Pastor Ejaz said the clerics came to Christian leaders and told them they had no suspicion that Christians had torn the pages, and that both Muslims and Christians should be vigilant and try to find the culprit.

Since then, the pastor said, the situation has been tense but under control, with police fully cooperating.

"The situation is calm, and we have no fear from the local Muslims, but the real threat is from the madrassas of Chak 11-11-L, 81-9-L and Multan Road," said the pastor of the church, which was founded in 1906. "Even in Gojra the local Muslims had not attacked, but outsiders were the assailants, and that is the reason we are still frightened."

In Gojra, members of the banned Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, a pro-Taliban, Sunni Muslim group, and its al Qaeda-linked offshoot, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, were suspected of planning the attack that killed the Christians and injured at least 19 others. Urged on by clerics from mosque loudspeakers, the rampaging Islamists set fire to 50 homes and looted more than 100 houses.

Christian advocacy group Community Development Initiative (CDI) Field Officer Napoleon Qayyum said al Qaeda remnants have lost support following a Pakistani military operation in tribal areas along the Afghanistan border, and that to regain backing they were trying to exploit anti-U.S. and anti-Christian sentiment. He said well-coordinated efforts were underway to instigate Muslims against Christians by inciting hatred against the United States and the Pakistani government, a U.S. ally in anti-terrorism efforts. In this way, he said, the al Qaeda militants justify terrorist activities against the Pakistani government.

"Terrorism is like the AIDS virus, which keeps changing its tactics," Qayyum said.

CDI helped to encourage police to increase security in the Mission Village area, he added.

Superintendent of Police Cheema said 50 policemen had been stationed in the area to prevent potential conflicts and would remain there until rumors died down. Christian leaders outside the district had contacted area police warning that Islamists could try to spark violence.

"These Christians have a good liaison with the Christians of other districts and cities," he said.

Muslims in Maliks were cooperating fully with police to keep conflict from erupting, he said, adding that area Muslims were concerned that Christians in the 400-home Mission Village were not sending their children to school, which is located in the Maliks village of 2,000 Muslim homes. Cheema said area Muslims had indicated that if Christians were afraid, they would be willing to go to the Christian colony and bring their children to school.

Tensions after Gojra

The rumor of desecration of the Quran that led to the attack in Gojra, 50 kilometers (31 miles) from Faisalabad, on July 30 had prompted an Islamist arson assault on Korian village, seven miles from Gojra, that gutted 60 houses.

On June 30, a cleric in Kasur district's Bahmaniwala village used a mosque loudspeaker to announce a call to attack Christians that resulted in more than 500 Muslims ransacking and looting at least 110 houses. Chief Minister of the Punjab Shahbaz Sharif has ordered the arrest of six Muslim extremists, including suspected mastermind Qari Latif.

On Aug. 1, as houses in Gojra were burned and plundered, Muslim clerics called for demonstrations to protest the arrest of Islamists suspected in the Kasur violence. Pakistan People's Party's Provincial Assembly Member Ahmed Riaz Tohlu and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz's National Assembly Member Sheikh Wasim resolved the issue by assuring Christians that Kasur would remain secure and by promising the Islamists that the arrested Muslims would be released. The officials told the provincial deputy general inspector, however, that the names of the released Muslims "should be the first to be mentioned in the FIR [First Information Report] if any untoward incident takes place."

Potential tensions were also warded off in Shantinagar, a village near Khanewal that suffered a massive onslaught from Islamic extremists in 1997, after another incident involving the Quran on Aug. 8. District Councilor Chaudhry Salamat Allah Rakha told Compass that when one of the village Christians went out in the fields, he saw a bearded person holding something.

"That man yelled at him, at which point the other man ran away," Rakha said. "This man tried to catch him but failed, and then he saw that there were three Qurans wrapped in a white cloth."

The Christian suspected the bearded man who fled intended to tear pages of the Quran in order to frame Christians for blasphemy. District Councilor Wazir Jacob arrived at the site and called police, and Sadar police station House Officer Chaudhry Zaka came soon after and seized the three Qurans.

Rakha said that police were asked to file a First Information Report on the incident, but the district police officer refused on grounds that it would create tensions in the area.

Tensions were simmering in St. Henry Colony in Lahore after an altercation over an inconveniently parked car led to a gang fight. Local Pastor Azam Anthony told Compass that on Aug. 6 a Muslim family parked a car close to the front of a house owned by Christians, and a Christian woman came out of the house and asked them to move as it hampered their ability to enter.

"At this the Muslim woman dragged her by her hair, and the Christian woman in her effort to release herself got hold of her shalwar [a garment like trousers]," Pastor Anthony said. A man with the Muslim woman grew furious and began beating the Christian woman, he said.

"The sight further incited Christian boys there who were watching this all going on," he said. "They asked that man why did he beat a woman, and they beat the man."

The Muslim man gathered other Muslims, along with a Muslim councilor of the area, and began fighting the Christian boys. Pastor Anthony said that before leaving, the Muslims said they would deal with the Christians after Friday prayers.

"That afternoon was quite tense, and Christians of the area had prepared themselves for another Gojra incident," Pastor Anthony said. The timely intervention of Christian leaders and police has averted any further incidents – so far.

In the wake of the Gojra attack, Christians have deliberated whether to arm themselves so they can defend themselves against further attacks. One Christian, Naveed Masih, who fired into the air as the Islamist throng attacked, has been credited with reducing the number of casualties and damages. Dubbed Naveed the Soldier, he was the only man with a rifle when the mobs charged Gojra. Several Christian women had taken refuge in his house.

A Muslim association based in Gojra, the Muslim Mahaz Tanzeem for Peace, has since tried to blame Masih for setting off the violence and charged three priests and another Christian with providing him weapons. According to Asia News, the association has threatened another Islamist wave of violence unless the four Christians are arrested.

District Councilor Rakha said that since the attack, about 15 boys have been armed and trained to keep watch at night. Christians in other areas, such as Youhanabad and Bahar Colony in Lahore, told Compass that they would rather die defending themselves than be killed doing nothing.

Petition for Prosecution

In view of the increase in attacks against Christians in Pakistan, the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) has filed a petition with the United Nations through its European body, the European Center for Law and Justice.

"We have expressed in the strongest terms possible that the Pakistani government must prosecute acts of violence based upon religion," said Jay Sekulow, Chief Counsel of the ECLJ and the U.S.-based ACLJ. "Christians are being singled out and murdered because of their faith. Only when the Pakistani government effectively prosecutes those responsible for the acts of violence will attacks against Christians end."

The "blasphemy laws" that encourage Muslim violence against Christians violate the principle of the universality of religious freedom to which Pakistan officially adheres, Sekulow said.

The ECLJ petition calls on Pakistan to prosecute deadly attacks on Christians, which have claimed the lives of at least 60 Christians in the past decade in at least 27 separate incidents of Muslim-on-Christian violence. The ECLJ filing states: "More than two decades of blasphemy laws have taught Pakistani Muslims that the punishment for allegedly insulting Islam is death. The Pakistani government must repeal or procedurally change blasphemy laws."

Because Pakistan has proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in a resolution to the U.N. that it presented on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, it should abide by those terms for its own religious minorities, the ECLJ petition states.

Six Christian shot dead by Islamic militants in Pakistan

PCP (01.09.2009) / HRWF (02.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – The Islamic extremists gunned down 6 Christians and injured 7 more in Quetta city of Baluchistan on August 28, 2009, after threats of "Convert to Islam or Die".

The sad incident of killing Christians was target killing when Baluchistan was observing death anniversary of Baluch leader Akbar Bugti and Islamic extremists targeted peaceful Christian.

According to PCP, Mushtaq Masih owned a Laboratory named "Maryiam Labs" in front of Civil Hospital Quetta located in busy city centre.

On Friday, August 28, 2009, at 9:00 AM, two gunmen on motorcycle opened discriminatory firing at Maryiam Labs killing Mushtaq Masih, Naveed John, Naymat Gill, Nadeem Akhtar and Suleman who were in laboratory while 7 other were seriously injured and hospitalized.

The sources told PCP that Christians were receiving threats from Islamic militants to convert to Islam or Die letters and calls from months which resulted in killing.

The bodies of 3 martyred Christians were brought to Punjab in funerals were performed in Lahore and Khushpur.

The province of Baluchistan bordering Afghanistan and Iran is facing unrest from years in wake of violence among Pakistan armed forces and Baluch liberation organizations.

The Baluch leaders blame Pakistan Army and Punjab province which dominates in population and holds control in Pakistan army to be responsible for poverty in Baluchistan and enjoying resources of Baluchistan since formation of Pakistan in 1947.

There are some reports that Baloch Liberation Alliance killed Christian who are Punjabi but settled in Baluchistan.

Mr. Shahbaz Bhatti, Federal Minister for Minorities was enjoying an Iftar Party in Islamabad when Christians in Punjab were receiving dead bodies of killed in Quetta. He was delivering lecture on harmony among religious communities with Islamic leaders in month of Ramadan.

The Quetta killing of Christians have spread fear among Christians in Pakistan and violence against Christian was condemned during funerals in Punjab and Quetta.

Dr. Nazir S Bhatti, Chief of Pakistan Christian Congress PCC have strongly condemned killing of Christians in Quetta and urged Pakistan government to ensure security for safety of life of 20 million Christians in Pakistan.

The Quetta police have registered FIR against unknown people on killing and injuring Christians. The condition of two injured is critical in hospital.

Christian organization starts signature campaign to repeal blasphemy laws In Pakistan

By Aftab Mughal

Minorities Concern of Pakistan (26.08.2009) / HRWF (02.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP), a human rights body of the Catholic Church in Pakistan, has started collecting signatures in support of repealing the controversial blasphemy laws (especially Sections 295-B, C and 298-A, B and C of the Pakistan Penal Code), which have been widely misused against religious minorities (mainly against Christians and Ahmadis) in Pakistan.

A press statement issued by the NCJP on Aug. 25 in Lahore, the second biggest city of Pakistan, that the campaign appeal seeks the immediate repeal of the laws, which are based on religion, referring to the violent attacks on Christian in Kasur, Gojra and other places.

In a recent incident on Aug. 1, a Muslim mob attacked a Christian locality and burnt 147 Christian houses and killed 9 Christians including 2 minors. Some Muslim religious and political leaders of the area instigated Muslims to attack on Christians because they have insulted Quran. While a provincial government minister stated that there was no such incident happened in that area.

In a joint statement by Archbishop Lawrence John Saldanha of Lahore and Mr. Peter Jacob, the Chairperson and the Executive Secretary of NCJP said that successive governments have failed to take a serious notice of the misuse of the law; the procedural amendments to registration of cases have failed too. Therefore the repeal is the only solution to these flawed and presumptuous laws. They urged the parliament to repeal blasphemy laws since they are source of promoting religious intolerance and disharmony among the citizens.

The statement says, "The incident in Gojra is an example of abuse of the Blasphemy Laws and its far-reaching consequences; it has been abused to justify violence on the others. NCJP call upon the fellow citizens to understand effects of these sections on the society. The incidents over past 20 years have shown that a large number of Muslims have also become victims of these laws and suffered, therefore the situation demands a serious and long term remedy."

According to data collected by NCJP, from 1986 to August 2009, at least 964 persons were alleged under this law. 479 of these were Muslims, 119 Christians, 340 Ahmadis, 14 Hindus and 10 were unknown. About 32 persons have been extra judicially murdered by the angry mob or an individual, the statement added.

Aftab Mughal
Editor
Minorities Concern of Pakistan
Aug.26, 2009

Christian victims of the massacres in Gojra reported by police

by Sarah John

AsiaNews (25.08.2009) / HRWF (26.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - From persecuted victims to under suspects. That is the fate of a group of Christians from Gojra, Punjab, attacked on August 3 by a mob of thousands of angry Muslims. Fundamentalists burned houses and burnt alive eight people and now police officers accused of failing to assist, have denounced the victims of the violence.

In the aftermath of the massacre, the Christians accused the police of not intervening to stop the assailants. In the days that preceded the attack, the police had received reports of possible violence by Islamic extremists, but did not take any action to avert the tragedy.

In response, officers in Gojra have in turn reported 29 Christians and 100 unidentified persons, for alleged "involvement" in the violence.

Among the Christian personalities targeted by police are also the Anglican Bishop John Samuel of the Church of Pakistan of Faisalabad and Finyas Paul Randhawa, a representative of the city council.

Outraged, human rights activists have called the decision by the police a "revenge" attack against the victims of violence. "We condemn outright this move by police" denounces Atif Jamil, director of a local NGO. "It is a revenge move by agents and district administration against the Christian victims of the accidents in Gojra".

The activist adds that these accusations are "baseless", made with the sole purpose of "covering the responsibilities of the police and undermining the case against the culprits." He stresses that "the involvement in the case of Bishop John Samuel, a Christian religious leader, is wrong because none of our religious leaders were involved in the violence."

Atif Jamil further denounces the "ambiguous" behaviour of the government, which on one hand "started the process of reconstruction in Gojra" but in the other "threatens" the local Christian community, who still bears the "scars" of the violence they suffered.

Pakistani Christians strive for justice following onslaught

Local security officials, Muslim clerics named in police complaint

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (05.08.2009) / HRWF (06.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A standoff here between Pakistani officials and Christians protesting the government's reluctance to prosecute a murderous Islamic assault ended with officials finally consenting to file a complaint against key Muslim clerics and security officers.

On Sunday (Aug. 2) hundreds of Christians demonstrated in Gojra, where the previous day rampaging Muslims – acting on an unsubstantiated rumor of "blasphemy" of the Quran and whipped into a frenzy by local imams and banned terrorist groups – killed at least seven Christians, looted more than 100 houses and set fire to 50 of them. At least 19 people were injured in the melee.

In protest of government reluctance to name two security officers for negligence in connection with Christians burned to death, demonstrators on Sunday refused to quickly bury the dead as officials requested. Believing the government was stalling in registering a complaint, demonstrators put the coffins with the charred remains on railroad tracks for three hours before officials agreed to include District Police Officer (DPO) Inkasar Khan and District Coordinating Officer (DCO) Sikandar Baloch in the complaint filed against more than 20 named and 800 unnamed people.

Among those arrested include members of the banned Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, a pro-Taliban, Sunni Muslim group, and its al Qaeda-linked offshoot, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi; officials said members of both groups were suspected of planning the attack in Gojra.

The Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS) reported that at least 14 Christians had been killed, and Christians in the affected areas told Compass the final death toll will likely be more than 20. The only deaths confirmed by hospital officials,

however, are those of seven members of a family who died when their home was set on fire; names and ages in this report vary slightly from the hospital list as they are based on Compass contact with their survivors: Hameed Masih, 75; his son Akhlaq Hameed, 55; Asia Hameed, 22, wife of Mohsin Hameed; her mother Parveen, 50; Asifa Hameed, 30 (wife of survivor Almas Hameed), and her 8-year-old daughter Umia and 4-year-old son Musa.

With the caskets containing the remains of the dead Christians sitting in public for some time, the local administration tried to force survivors to conduct a hasty funeral, telling them to hold a service in Catholic parish hall and bury the dead as soon as possible.

Federal Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti and other prominent Christians met with the local administration, but negotiations failed as the two security officials were not named in the First Information report (FIR). A Catholic priest identified only as Father Mani then told protestors that an FIR had been registered and that he had seen it, and that therefore the demonstration should be called off.

But protestors did not believe him, insisting that they would not quit until they saw a copy of the FIR. Only after continued protests, with the dead bodies on the railway track for more than three hours, did officials register a case against key suspects in connection with murder, looting and violence: more than 20 identified people, including DPO Khan and DCO Baloch, who are accused of negligence in allowing the Islamic violence to erupt, and some 800 unidentified suspects.

Nevertheless, sources told Compass, the two officers have not been suspended, terminated or arrested. Rather, they have been made Special Duty Officers – an officer who is fully paid but has yet to be posted.

The FIR also names Muslim clerics of several Gojra mosques, including the imam of nearby Chamra Mandi Mosque, called Firdausia Mosque. Muslim groups held a press conference today in Gojra calling on the government to free clerics named in the FIR, according to CLAAS. They also threatened to hang Talib Masih, father of the boy who was falsely accused of tossing cut pages of the Quran into the air as part of a wedding ceremony in Korian.

The same rumor of desecration of the Quran that led to Saturday's massive protest and attack in Gojra, 50 kilometers (31 miles) from Faisalabad, also prompted the arson assault on Thursday (July 30) by Islamic extremists on the village of Korian, seven miles from Gojra.

In the Gojra violence, several people have also implicated Qadir Awan, president of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) in Gojra, who was also named in the FIR. Zahid Iqbal, administrative head of a section of Gojra called Union Council-21, said that Awan had no role in the rioting.

The bodies of the seven Christians had been kept in the mortuary of Civil Hospital in Gojra, where the Christian advocacy group called Community Development Initiative (CDI) helped wash the bodies and facilitated their transfer to the families.

Government Response

Amid strict security, a funeral service for the victims of the Gojra riots' victims took place on Sunday (Aug. 2). Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah and Minorities Affairs Minister Bhatti participated in the funeral procession.

There Sanaullah announced that Punjab Chief Minister Sharif would visit the Christian community to express his condolences – "Beyond the FIR we are with you in punishing

those who let this conspiracy succeed or participated in this conspiracy," Sanaullah said – but Christians were disappointed the next day when he didn't show.

Christians refused to speak with the representatives the chief minister had sent in his stead nor with other PML-N members. Provincial Minorities Minister Kamran Michael threatened to resign over the issue, and due to this pressure Chief Minister Sharif visited the area yesterday (Aug. 4), assuring the community that he would do his utmost to provide justice.

To assess the damage, the chief minister has constituted a 16-member group under the chairmanship of Michael.

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has formed a committee to ascertain the amount of damage done during the rioting, and as soon as President Asif Ali Zardari learned of the incident he sent Minorities Minister Bhatti to Gojra.

President Zardari also announced that 500,000 rupees (US\$6,040) will be made available for each person killed and 300,000 rupees (US\$3,624) for those whose houses were burned. Prime Minister Gilani is also expected to announce a special package for the affected families.

A report submitted by Bhatti to the president states that the Punjab government and local administration failed to stem the violence. It adds that additional troops were not sent to help local authorities in Gojra, despite the advice of the minorities minister.

Interior Minister Rehman Malik has also sought a report from the interior secretary and the Punjab inspector general.

Farahnaz Ispahani, spokesperson for President Zardari, told Compass that after Muslims burned more than 50 homes in Korian village on July 30 and 31 – following the accusation of "blasphemy" of the Quran that proved to be false – the president asked the Punjabi government to report on it. After the subsequent Aug. 1 rioting in Gojra, she said, he immediately dispatched Bhatti to the site with orders to report back.

Ispahani said that after the president talked to Prime Minister Gilani, the prime minister called Chief Minister of the Punjab Sharif over the incident. When it became clear that police were unable to handle the matter, she said, the president ordered Rangers – paramilitary troops mainly deployed along the border for security – into Gojra to take charge and save Christians from further damage.

CDI Field Officer Napoleon Qayyum told Compass that CDI had strongly objected to the route of the Aug. 1 Islamic demonstration – which had been called to protest the release of the man whose son was falsely accused of desecrating pages of the Quran – saying he had told DPO Khan that it should not pass by any churches or Christian areas. As Islamic clerics made threatening announcements from mosques the day before the rampage, Qayyum said, DCO Baloch also had ample warning that violence was imminent.

"The way things were moving in Gojra, no rocket science was needed to predict this fallout," he said, adding that announcements from loudspeakers mounted on vehicles broadcast how Christians had supposedly desecrated the Quran.

Punjab Minister for Law Sanaullah said an initial investigation of allegations of the Quran being blasphemed indicated "there has not been any incident of desecration."

The CDI also objected to a two-member committee set up by provincial Chief Minister Sharif regarding violence in Korian village.

"Our objection was that no Christian was on the committee," Qayyum said, "because how could administration and police be thought to be unbiased? It was the first step where the provincial government showed partiality."

After Korian village Christians were attacked, the government showed no interest in arresting or reining in rampaging mobs, according to Qayyum, who said that the day after that assault he saw crowds there still armed with clubs wearing green, dark brown or black turbans, an indication that "religious fanatics were still roaming free."

Likewise, he added, the provincial government allowed the civil administration and police to use delaying tactics in June 30 violence in Bahmaniwala village, where 110 houses were plundered and ransacked in Kasur.

Christians make up less than 5 percent of Pakistan's 175 million population, which is mainly Muslim.

Christians burned to death in Islamist attacks in Pakistan

14 believers reportedly killed; more than 100 homes burned in Gojra town, Korian village

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (01.08.2009) / HRWF (02.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Islamic extremists today set ablaze more than 50 houses and a church in this town in northeastern Pakistan following an accusation of "blasphemy" of the Quran, leaving at least 14 Christians dead, sources said.

The dead include women and children, with several other burn victims unable to reach hospitals for medical care, according to the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS). The attack came amid a protest by thousands of Muslim Islamists - including members of banned militant groups - that resulted in another six people dying when participants shot at police and officers responded with tear gas and gunfire.

The same rumor of desecration of the Quran that led to today's massive protest and attack in Gojra, 50 kilometers (31 miles) from Faisalabad, also prompted an arson assault on Thursday (July 30) by Islamic extremists on the village of Korian, seven miles from Gojra, that gutted 60 houses.

Punjab Minister for Law Rana Sanaullah reportedly said an initial investigation of allegations of the Quran being blasphemed indicated "there has not been any incident of desecration."

Because of the earlier assault in Korian, Pakistani officials were already in the area and had sought reinforcements to help control the 11 a.m. demonstration today in Gojra, but security forces were slow to respond, according to CLAAS.

"There were unaccountable people in the mob and they were out of control because only four police constables were trying to stop the mob of thousands of people," a CLAAS report said.

Crowd size and attacks grew, and Islamists managed to block main roads and railways to keep fire brigades from fighting the house fires, according to CLAAS.

With authorities also blocking roads to keep more Muslim extremists from entering from neighboring villages, clerics at local mosques broadcast messages that those “who love Muhammad and Islam should gather with them to defend the Islam because it is in danger,” according to CLAAS.

In response to the police road closures, Islamists became more aggressive and began burning property using firearms and explosives in nearby hamlets where primarily Christians live, according to CLAAS.

“About 20 houses have been burnt in Chauck No. 424, and valuable things have been stolen from about 100 Christian houses,” according to the CLAAS statement.

Asam Masih, a Christian in Gojra, said that that women and children were severely burned and had no way to get to a hospital, according to CLAAS, which was helping to transport victims for medical care.

Islamists set on fire a Catholic church on Sumandri road and destroyed it using firearms and explosives, according to CLAAS.

“50 houses are burned and totally destroyed,” the CLAAS statement read. “14 people including children, women and men are expired.”

Wedding and funeral

As Christians have begun defending themselves against the onslaughts, mainstream media have already begun referring to the overwhelmingly Islamist aggression as “Christian and Muslim rioting.”

Compass investigated the facts of the trigger incident in the village of Korian, where more than 500 Muslims, responding to calls from a mosque, attacked Christians in Toba Tek Singh district. Local sources said nearly all village Christian families fled. The fires destroyed their homes – collapsing their wooden roofs or melting T-iron roofs – and all belongings within that the attacking Muslims had not first looted.

“Our house is burnt and everything is gone, but Muslim neighbors around are not willing to give us a loaf of bread or a sip of water to us,” 80-year-old Baba Sharif Masih told Compass.

He and his wife Hanifa Bibi, 73, were the only Christians left in the village in the northeastern province of Punjab. Masih, who is paralyzed, said the attackers let them live when they pleaded that they were unable to run away.

Two church buildings were ransacked but not burned, Compass sources said.

One Christian resident of Korian identified only as Shabir said the blasphemy accusation grew out of an incident at a wedding on Sunday (July 25). During the ceremony, Christian wedding guests tossed currency notes and coins into the air according to custom, with children catching most of them as they fall. Shabir told Compass a Muslim funeral was taking place at the same time, however, and that mourners told wedding celebrants to stop their music; they apparently declined.

The next day, Muslims met with the parents of the bride, Talib and Mukhtar Masih, and told them that their sons had cut pages of the Quran the size of currency notes and had been throwing them in the air the previous night, Shabir said.

"Talib said that nothing like this has happened, but that if there was anything, 'I'll call my son and he will definitely apologize for it,'" Shabir said. "But then they immediately began beating them and left Talib when he fell unconscious."

Shabir said that afterward when Christian women went to the Muslims and told them that they were wrong to beat Talib Masih, the assailants yelled at them and tried to attack them, but they were able to flee to their homes.

On Thursday (July 30), Shabir said, Muslim clerics announced from the village mosque that "if any infidel Christian wanted to save his or her life, then get out of here or they would be killed."

As the Muslim mobs gathered, he said, Christians immediately fled – leaving their meals prepared and fires burning in stoves.

"These assailants first looted these houses and then set them on fire and closed the door," he said. "Since then, not a single Christian is left there except a very old couple."

Islamist's version

Village Muslims declined to open their doors when Compass reporters called on them.

But one of three Muslim leaders standing with a crowd of turban-clad Islamists at the entrance to the village, Qari Noor Ahmed, told Compass the story of the alleged cut pages of the Quran at the marriage ceremony.

"Because it was night, no one noticed, but in the morning we saw that the pages of the Quran had been cut to currency note size, and they were trampled under people's feet," he said.

Ahmed said that village authorities later met and called in Talib and Mukhtar Masih. He said that council authorities decided that their son should apologize.

"But when his son came in the meeting, he by no means seemed apologetic, rather he was aggressive," Ahmed said. "This was the root cause, and we told Talib and Mukhtar to tell their children to apologize."

Ahmed said that afterwards they searched for Talib and Mukhtar Masih and their sons but could not find them.

"Then Muslims became furious that first they had profaned the Quran, and now they had fled and were not apologizing," Ahmed said. "Then the villagers attacked their houses. All the Christians who are visiting here are armed, and we are sitting here to avoid any untoward incident. It is better for you to leave now or you may be attacked."

Munawar Masih, a 20-year-old Christian in Korian, said that he was preparing supper around 7 p.m. when he heard the announcement from the mosque that "infidel Christians had profaned the Holy Quran, and let's teach them exemplary lesson."

He looked outside as his family was about to sit down to dinner and saw a large mob approaching.

"We just fled from there to save our lives, and since then we are hiding in Gojra," he said.

Private TV channel reporter Ghulam Muhaiddin told Compass that after the Korian houses were set on fire, the Islamic extremists blocked the Faisalabad-Gojra Highway to keep firefighters from arriving.

"When the attack was unleashed, several people were injured and even some domestic animals were killed," he said.

Muhaiddin said that after negotiations between the District Police Officer and the protestors, Station House Officer (SHO) Jamshed Iqbal Nasir was suspended for not properly handling the incident.

Christians accused

Officials at the Sadar Police Station, in whose precincts the attack took place, were not available for comment, but a deputy called Imam Din said that a First Information Report (FIR) had been filed under Section 295-B, or blasphemy of the Quran, against Talib and Mukhtar Masih.

He said that the complainant in the case was Muhammad Ashraf, and that police had possession of the alleged burnt or cut papers of the Quran. Din said that after SHO Nasir was suspended and Ashiq Hussein replaced him, Hussein was willing to file an FIR against those who had ransacked and burned houses of Christians. He said the accused were still at large and that police would arrest them after Christians returned to their homes.

Asked if police were under pressure from Islamists or the government, Din declined to comment.

Advocacy group Community Development Initiative (CDI) field officer Napoleon Qayyum said that the group had informed high officials about the Korian attack, including the presidency, and that soon afterward the president issued a notice. Qayyum noted that the Korian and Gojra attacks follow a July 1 attack in Kasur, where swarms of Islamists ransacked and damaged 110 homes.

"It is a clear sign that violent attacks against Christians have dramatically increased in recent days," he said, adding that CDI would provide legal help to victims. CDI works with assistance from the American Centre of Law and Justice.

Muhaiddin of the private TV channel added that Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif had taken the notice of the attacks and was forming an investigative team comprising the Faisalabad Regional Police Officer and Faisalabad Commissioner, which will send a report to him.

A spokesman from the Pakistani president's office, former Sen. Farhatullah Babar, told Compass that President Asif Ali Zardari had taken a notice of the attack and had asked the provincial government to investigate. He said the president has condemned the attack and that there was no justification for anyone taking the law into their own hands.

Asked why the committee constituted by the provincial government did not have any Christians on it, he responded that it was the discretion of the provincial government to determine the make-up of the panel and that the federal government was concerned only about the report. Asked why an FIR had been filed against Christians and not Muslims for ransacking and vandalizing, he said only that appropriate action would be taken after the inquiry.

Member of National Assembly Farahnaz Ispahani, wife of Pakistani Ambassador to the United States Husain Haqqani, told Compass that President Zardari had directed Federal

Minorities Affairs Minister Shahbaz Bhatti to visit the area and "express sympathy with the victims."

Pakistani minority rights defender said to be victim of Islamists

Muslim who posed as Christian then converted, married woman opposed Joseph Francis' efforts.

By Edward Ross

Compass Direct (23.07.2009) / HRWF (24.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Pakistani minority rights defender Joseph Francis has been unjustly jailed by Islamists and others who oppose his work on behalf of Christians, according to the legal aid organization Francis directs.

An Islamist in Punjab Province who said he had converted to Christianity subsequently converted a young woman to Islam and married her, setting into motion a series of spurious charges when her parents brought her to Francis for counsel, according to the Lahore-based Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS). Angered when her family brought her to Francis hoping he would counsel her away from Islam, Mehboob Basharat then arranged for baseless charges to be filed against Francis, director of CLAAS, for allegedly detaining her and setting her on fire, CLAAS officials said in a statement.

Francis was jailed on July 12 after Basharat filed specious charges against him for forging documents and concealing his travel out of the country while on bail. Those charges arose out of the previous case, in which Basharat arranged for the woman he converted to Islam to charge the CLAAS director and others with forcibly detaining and assaulting her in 2006 – even though she previously had told police she suffered no ill treatment at the CLAAS offices.

"His only crime was to help suffering parents of a young Christian girl who was taken away from her family," according to the CLAAS statement.

Francis' predicament began when Basharat went to Bishop Samuel Azariah of Raiwind diocese in 2006 and told him that he, his wife and two children had converted from Islam to Christianity. Since his conversion, he told Bishop Azariah, his Muslim family and friends had ostracized him, and he pleaded with the clergyman to employ him. Bishop Azariah gave him a job in the diocese and provided a living space for him on the church premises, according to CLAAS.

Though he never attended church services, Basharat started socializing with Christian families of the congregation and showed excessive interest in their daughters, according to CLAAS. Pastor Emmanuel Khokhar took note and gave Basharat a warning, according to CLAAS.

Basharat became close with Roma Masih, one of six daughters in a family at the congregation, and on Sept. 26, 2006 he took her to a Muslim education center called Jamia Naeemia Lahore, where she embraced Islam and took on the name Aisha; he later eloped with her, and on Nov. 26, 2006 they married under Islamic rites, according to CLAAS.

When her family found out, they went to Bishop Azariah, who referred them to CLAAS for help. Roma/Aisha's parents, Khursheed Masih and Shamim Masih, asked Francis to talk

with their daughter. Basharat, meantime, returned to Raiwind (25 kilometers from Lahore) to collect his first wife and children, at one point threatening Bishop Azariah when the clergyman tried to talk to him.

On Dec. 23, 2006 Basharat allowed Roma/Aisha to go to her parents' house. They immediately brought her to CLAAS offices, insisting that Francis keep her in the organization's second-floor shelter for abused women.

"They said that if she stayed away from Basharat, maybe she will change her mind and come back to her family," according to the CLAAS statement.

Roma/Aisha, some of her sisters and their mother stayed overnight at the shelter, and the convert told Francis that she was now a Muslim and did not wish to associate with "infidels." Francis told Roma/Aisha's parents that she now considered herself a Muslim and urged them not to insist on their daughter remaining with them, according to CLAAS.

Upon learning that the Masihis had taken their daughter to CLAAS offices, Basharat on Dec. 23, 2006 complained to police in Lahore that the Christian parents of his wife were detaining her. The next day, police summoned Francis. When he and Roma/Aisha arrived at the station that evening, Basharat and a crowd of 40-45 mullahs (Muslim clergy) were waiting for them.

Nevertheless, Roma/Aisha signed a statement at the police station saying that she had not been held hostage or detained against her will, that she went to CLAAS offices of her own free will and that no one misbehaved or ill-treated her there, according to CLAAS. She left with Basharat.

On Feb. 18, 2007, Basharat, Roma/Aisha and attorney Raja Nathaniel, a church-going attorney at odds with the local Christian community, held a press conference in which Basharat accused Bishop Azariah and Francis of abducting his new wife and forcing her to reconvert back to Christianity. Nathaniel, according to CLAAS, at times "has converted to Islam to marry young girls" and has several cases pending against him for illegally confiscating church property in Raiwind; CLAAS notes that in most of those cases it provides legal assistance to the church.

Three months after the press conference, under the guidance of Basharat and with the financial support of Nathaniel, Roma/Aisha filed charges at the Icchara, Lahore police station against her father, mother, three sisters, Bishop Azariah, Pastor Khokhar and Francis; she accused all of them of forcibly detaining her, mistreating her and attempting to burn her.

Incarceration

All of the accused obtained pre-arrest bail. In July 2007, Francis went to England at the invitation of the late former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, along with prominent political leaders, to attend a three-day conference in London. Summoned to a bail hearing on July 14, 2007, he came back on July 15, 2007 and appeared in court the next day, according to CLAAS.

On Dec. 24, 2008 Francis learned that Basharat had filed a new case against him, accusing him of concealing his travel abroad while on bail and forging a medical certificate. Also charged were CLAAS employee Ashar Sarfaraz and Sarfaraz's brother-in-law, Zulfiqar Wilson.

The forgery charges arose after CLAAS submitted a medical certificate indicating that Francis, who suffers from diabetes, was too ill to return quickly for the court hearing on July 14, 2007. CLAAS Program Officer Katherine Sapna said that former CLAAS staff

members Aneeqa Maria Akthar and Justin Gill submitted the medical certificate, but Akthar told Compass said neither she nor Gill submitted any documents related to the certificate and never went to the court. She added that CLAAS had not even assigned her to the case.

"When someone submits any document before the court," she told Compass, "the court takes the submission by getting signatures of a person who submits the document, and certainly there are no signatures of mine."

She acknowledged that she discussed the matter with CLAAS lawyers at the time – Akbar Munawar Durrani, Tahir Gull and Aric John – and that she suggested that if Francis were to try return in time for the July 14 court summons, it would cause an undue hardship on him as a diabetic to appear in court after arriving in Pakistan from England early in the morning.

"It was just a suggestion, and it did not lead to [me committing] forgery," she said. "Instead, Ashar Sarfaraz heard this and he went to the doctor himself who was treating Mr. Francis, without asking or telling any of us, and got the certificate. He also submitted the certificate himself in the court, and not the lawyers."

On these charges Francis obtained pre-arrest bail on Dec. 29, 2008, and when CLAAS filed a petition in Lahore High Court for the dismissal of this case, the court set hearing for June 8, according to CLAAS.

At that hearing, Basharat's lawyer accused Francis not only of being in contempt of court by having traveled abroad while on bail but of using his influence to harass Roma/Aisha into forsaking Islam – the young woman's remaining a Muslim notwithstanding.

Francis' counsel tried to explain to the court that Basharat and his wife were "misleading the court by purposely making it a religious issue for their own vested interest." They informed the court that his travel was not concealed but public knowledge, having been published in major newspapers, and that therefore Francis had no reason to prepare or submit any documents explaining his actions.

"But the court overlooked every argument and dismissed the petition for dismissal," according to CLAAS' statement. "On July 9, the same judge who dismissed the petition rejected Mr. Joseph Francis' bail in this case and ordered the police to arrest Mr. Francis."

This is not the first time that Pakistani courts have put their bias against Christians on display, according to CLAAS.

"Over the years, CLAAS has perused several such cases in which law was overlooked and justice was denied to victims on the basis of their religion, gender, political affiliation and social status," organization officials said in the statement.

CLAAS urged proponents of human rights to write the Pakistani president, prime minister, foreign and interior ministers, chief justice, federal minister of Law Justice and Human Rights, and Pakistani Embassies around the world.

Muslims attack 110 homes of Christians in Pakistan

Beating of field worker leads to hatchet attack on his family, then on all village Christians

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (03.07.2009) / HRWF (04.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - After a Muslim beat a Christian field worker for asking him to let him pass on Tuesday (June 30), a cleric in a village near here used a mosque loudspeaker to announce a call to attack Christians that resulted in more than 500 Muslims ransacking and looting at least 110 houses.

With the mosque falsely broadcasting the accusation that the Christian had blasphemed Islam, the Muslim recruits rampaged through Kasur district's Bahmaniwala village, breaking down gates, wrecking and plundering homes and in some cases beating Christian women. They set various items ablaze including vehicles, though Compass found fire damage to homes was minimal.

"We don't even have potable water, as they have damaged the turbine," villager Zareena Bibi told Compass. "We knew about the incident, but could never imagine that they would wreak such devastation. They have not spared a single house here."

Outraged that the lower-class Christian field worker on his tractor had asked the Muslim to move out of his way, 15 to 20 Muslims had previously mounted a hatchet attack on the family of the field worker, 37-year-old Sardar Masih, wounding his brother's head, family members told Compass.

Masih told Compass that after his family members had sought treatment at a local hospital - where medical staff members denied them local anesthesia for their stitches because they were Christians - they learned that a call to gather had been issued from a local mosque regarding the altercation.

"We were told that in that meeting they decided to blame Christians for blasphemy of their Islamic religion," Masih told Compass. The Muslims in the meeting, he added, then schemed with Muslim cleric Muhammad Latif of Maanwala, who appealed from the mosque loudspeaker for villagers to gather to "teach Christians an exemplary lesson."

Latif, who heads a vigilante group called Sunni Force, also managed to recruit Muslims from other hamlets, Masih said. Soon the number of Muslims swelled to 500 to 800, according to the eyewitnesses.

The ensuing attack began with the breaking of electricity meters at 110 homes, cutting their power, area Christians said.

Damages and Threats

Masih told Compass the triggering incident began when he and his 10-year-old son, Waqas Masih, were returning from the fields on a tractor at 7 p.m.

"When we entered the village, Muhammad Hussein and his nephew had parked their motorbike in the middle of the road," Masih said. "I requested them to get it aside, and Hussein said that he did not know how a 'sweeper' [chuhra, a derogatory term designating lower-class Christians] could order him. I was with my son, and I only requested them to let us go as we are getting late."

He said Hussein was drunk from a nearby wedding celebration.

"I only made the request, and then they got up on the tractor and dragged me down and began beating me," Masih said. "Then my son ran home and told my family members."

Masih's brother, 32-year-old Ashraf Masih, told Compass that he was at home when Waqat arrived out of breath saying that two men were beating his father. Ashraf Masih and brothers Mushtaq Masih, 35, Tariq Masih, 25, and Shahbaz Masih, along with their

cousins Shafiq and Vikram Masih and 65-year-old father Chanan Masih, rushed to the site. By the time they arrived, Ashraf Masih said, a large crowd had gathered, but they were only exchanging harsh words and the conflict was cooling down.

"I told Muhammad Hussein that whoever he is, he has no right to lord it over them," Ashraf Masih told Compass, adding that as they were leaving Hussein asked how could chuhras talk to them that way.

After the brief encounter, Ashraf Masih said, they went home back, not knowing that Hussein and his cohorts were planning to attack them. After half an hour, he said, Hussein and 15 to 20 other men armed with sticks and hatchets launched their assault on their house.

"They broke the door and smaller walls, and they beat my father, my mother and paternal uncle," he said.

An assailant delivered a blow with hatchet to the head of his brother Mushtaq Masih, Ashraf Masih said, and blood gushed out. Other brothers also received hatchet wounds.

"When we realized that our life was in danger, we recklessly fought and made them flee," he said. "Three of their men were also injured, but I don't know their names."

Afterward village official Muhammad Shafiq went to the family and warned them not to go to police, he said.

"We followed his advice, but he cheated on us," Ashraf Masih said. "He took the Muslim party to the police station, where they got an FIR [First Information Report] registered, and then Shafiq and Manawala Deputy Mayor [Zulfiqar Ali] Bhutto took them to a hospital to get a medico-legal report."

The family learned 90 minutes after the altercation that the Muslim assailants had gone to the police station, he said.

"Then we also rushed to the Sadar police station, but the police told us that an FIR had already been registered of the incident so they could not write another report," Ashraf Masih said. "Then we went to Kasur Civil Hospital to obtain medical treatment, but when we entered the hospital they were already sitting there, and with them were Muhammad Shafiq and Dr. Bhutto."

The injured Masih family members were shocked, he said, to learn that Shafiq had brought the assailants to the hospital but had told them not to go to the police station or the hospital for treatment.

After waiting for hours for medical treatment with no one paying them any attention, he said, at 5 a.m. their wounds were stitched without local anesthesia.

"The medical staff treated us like animals, and even made us sit outside all night," Ashraf Masih said.

After the received basic first-aid treatment, Ashraf Masih said, his brother Sardar Masih suggested that they not go home for a few days, as the police had filed the Muslim assailants' FIR. "Only our women were at home when our house was attacked the next day," he said.

In spite of the assault on the family the day of the triggering incident, local Christians said no one foresaw the attack on the community on Wednesday (July 1).

"We thought that it was just an ordinary clash and would settle down with the passage of time, but they not only came back and attacked us, they then did havoc to all Christian families," said Chanan Masih, the brothers' father, adding that there was no justification for the attack on all the Christian villagers. "We used to visit their houses and even respected their Muslim call to prayer."

On that day most of the men were away harvesting crops and others had gone to the Lahore Vegetable Market to sell them, while still others were busy getting Christians bailed out in the case filed against them. Area Christians said that most of their homes were therefore defenseless.

The Muslim mobs entered homes where mostly women and children were present and in some instances beat the women, local Christians said. In other instances, they said, women ran up to their roofs or to nearby fields and hid themselves to save their honor and lives.

"In one sad instance, a young girl who was taking bath got so nervous that she ran to the fields stark naked," said one local Christian. "Such was the perilous state after 15 to 20 men entered each Christian house after breaking down gates."

Throughout the violence that began about 7:30 p.m. and lasted two hours, area Christians said, the assailants threatened to throw all Christians out of the village.

Local resident Zareena Bibi told Compass that the looters stole from her son, Vikram Bashir, money from recent crop sales – 200,000 rupees (US\$2,470) – along with 70,000 rupees (US\$865) in cash gathered at his marriage the previous week. The attackers also stole a gold ornament from his bride worth 30,000 rupees (US\$370).

Naseem Masih told Compass that her family had gold and more than 200,000 rupees looted. Amid broken glass, she pointed toward damages to two doors, a window grill, a fan, crockery and kitchen utensils that could no longer be used. Her mother-in-law said that they made her remove her gold earrings.

"My son got married only three months ago," said one area Christian. "They took out new clothes from trunks and threw them on the floor so that they may not remain useful. They also gathered such articles and put them on fire. They were shouting that they would throw out these 'sweepers' from here."

Sardar Masih said that his family's house was especially hard-hit during the violence and looting. The attackers not only damaged his tractor, he said, but they put sandy soil in its engine that rendered it nonfunctional. The tractor was the main source of income for the family, he added, and without it they were left virtually unemployed.

"They have tried to make us completely poor and without any home," he said.

Expel and Ostracize

Similarly, Naseem Masih told Compass that the assailants had burned their 10 donkey carts. And a few area Christians also reported that some families had been deprived of the dowries they had accumulated over the years for their daughters yet to be given in marriage.

Local resident Allah Ditta told Compass that he had gone to Lahore Market to sell crops.

"We were informed over the phone that Muslims had attacked us," he said, adding that the assailants beat his wife and children and also looted 100,000 rupees (US\$1,235) from his home.

Local Christians said that on Wednesday (July 1), at about 2 p.m. several young Muslims gathered and began chanting slogans calling for the expulsion of Christians, saying, "We will not let them live here." By 2:30 p.m., the area mosque was announcing that no shop should provide anything to Christians and that they should totally ostracize them.

"This announcement was made by Maulvi Latif," one Christian said. Maulvi is an honorific referring to an expert in Islamic law.

Another Christian said that Latif had twice before created problems for Christians, though on a smaller scale. Area Christians and Muslims have lived next to each other peaceably for more than a century and had good relations, village Christians said.

"There has never been any such incident before," said one Christian.

When Compass entered the village and asked about the conflicts this week, Muslims claimed complete ignorance of them.

Talks and Restoration

The Community Development Initiative (CDI) advocacy group is facilitating talks between the two sides, though mistrust still runs high in the area, said CDI Research Officer Napoleon Qayyum. He said the CDI requested that Water and Power and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) Managing Director Tahir Basharat Cheema ensure that electricity be restored to the houses of Christians.

After the request, electricity was provisionally restored to several Christian families until new electricity meters are installed, he said, adding that WAPDA has begun installing new electricity meters at no cost as well. Qayyum said that Mushtaq Masih had requested that the CDI take up the case of the brothers, and that the organization would provide legal assistance to others who were injured with the help of the American Center of Law and Justice (ACLJ).

CDI is also providing meals to all 110 families, he said.

"Our partner, ACLJ, is constantly monitoring the situation and is providing its full support in this difficult time," Qayyum said. Several Christian organizations were visiting the area and providing help to the injured, he said, adding that the only area church building was unaffected by the assault.

Muslim Leaders Appalled

Among Muslim leaders, Pakistan Peoples Party Member of Provincial Assembly (MPA) Chaudhry Ahmed Ali Tohlu told Compass that the culprits must be brought to justice. Tohlu asserted that Muslims would be able to repeat such violence only over his dead body and those of other like-minded Muslim leaders.

"I am born in a Muslim family, but today I am feeling bad because of what my fellow Muslims have done," he said.

Member of National Assembly Sheikh Wasim of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz said, "Christians are our brothers and sisters, and what has been done to them is very unjust, and being a Muslim I apologize to the Christian community in my capacity."

Divisional Police Officer Kasur Sultan said the violence "is a shameful incident," and Union Council Nazim Sardar Fakhir said, "We all are ashamed, and those who instigated the matter should be brought to book."

Human Rights and Minority Affairs Provincial Minister Kamran Michael said that Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif had told him over the phone to go to the village and express solidarity with the Christian community. He pledged that all damages would be covered by the government.

"Our religion teaches peace, so we should forgive the culprits, but the government will take action against the culprits," Michael said.

MPA Joel Amir Sahotra condemned the looting that characterized the attack.

In the aftermath of the violence, police, civil administration, politicians and Christians of the area met, CDI's Qayyum said, and established a 12-member committee to keep watch and inform authorities of any wrongdoing.

"Till the time things are normalized, anyone found fueling the matter would be punished, and the committee is responsible for informing the police," he said. "After the meeting, Deputy Mayor Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and I went together in the mosque and Bhutto made a public announcement on the loudspeaker."

The deputy mayor announced from the mosque that what took place was shameful and that all the shops must resume selling everything to the Christian community, he said.

Area Christians, however, said they remained fearful of new outbreaks of violence.

Tortured Pakistani Christian languishing on false charges

Police maneuver to keep incapacitated son of preacher in jail – and out of hospital

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (23.06.2009) / HRWF (24.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net – A 37-year-old Christian is languishing in a Sialkot jail after police broke his backbone because his father was preaching Christ, according to a local advocacy group.

Arshad Masih had been in a hospital – chained to his bed on false robbery charges – after police torture that began Dec. 28, 2008 left him incapacitated. He was discharged from Allama Iqbal Memorial Hospital in Sialkot on Saturday (June 20) and returned to jail despite efforts by the Community Development Initiative (CDI), a support group that is providing Masih legal assistance.

CDI Research Officer Napoleon Qayyum said that hospital personnel treated Masih callously, but that conditions there were better than in the jail in Sialkot. At least in the hospital, Qayyum said, Masih's gray-haired father was able to carry him on his shoulders when he needed to go to the bathroom.

Hospital staff members released Masih even though they knew he would not receive the medical care he needs in jail and could face further abuse, the CDI researcher said.

"We told the hospital administration and doctors that Masih would be released from jail within a few days, so he should not be discharged from the hospital as he would not be taken care of in jail, but they paid no heed to our request," Qayyum said.

He said Sialkot police gave assurances that Masih would be released from jail if he arrived there from the hospital by 10 p.m. A police van left early Saturday morning from Sialkot to bring Masih from the hospital in Lahore to Sialkot jail, but it did not reach the hospital until 6 p.m. even though it is only 100 kilometers (62 miles) from Sialkot to Lahore.

Qayyum said officers also invented delays on the return trip.

"Despite our requests to the police van staff, they reached the jail at 10:30 p.m.," Qayyum said. "The Sialkot police used the delays to demoralize us by creating problems so that we do not file a petition for torturing."

The CDI official said the group's first priority is to "take him out of Sialkot so that police may not further create problems for him."

Murder Threat

Hajipura police detained Masih on Dec. 28 on orders from the Sadar police station in Gujranwala, where Masih's father, Iqbal Masih, had been preaching Christ.

The elder Masih, an itinerant preacher who has traveled to remote areas to proclaim Christ for three decades, told Compass that objections to his ministry led to false accusations of robbery against his son. Area Muslims resented his preaching and his visits to a Christian family in Gujranwala, he said, and told him to stop visiting the family. "They told me that I was preaching a false religion and should stop doing it, and that I should succumb to their pressure," the elder Masih told Compass.

Area Muslims had complained to Gujranwala police of the elder Masih's efforts, and officers there first sought to arrest him in a case filed against "unidentified people," he said. Later, he said, Gujranwala police told Hajipura police to charge his son in some robbery cases, as Arshad Masih lived in the Hajipura precincts.

When police arrested Arshad Masih on Dec. 28, they tortured him for several days, the younger Masih said.

"They hung me upside down all night, beat me and used all inhumane torture methods, leaving me permanently paralyzed," he said.

Police falsely named him in a robbery case, according to CDI. All others named in the case were released after paying bribes, advocacy group officials said. Police officers also asked Masih's father for a bribe of 50,000 rupees [US\$620], the elder Masih said.

"They asked me as well for 50,000 rupees, but I refused to pay on the grounds that it was illegal and additionally I hadn't that much money," Iqbal Masih said.

The complainant in the robbery case eventually testified that Arshad Masih hadn't been among the robbers, and he was granted bail. Before court orders reached the jail, however, Sialkot police informed Sadar police officers in Gujranwala, who arrived at the jail and had Masih remanded to them for a robbery case filed against "unidentified people."

"Because of that, Masih could not be freed for one moment," CDI's Qayyum said.

Gujranwala police also threatened to kill Masih in a staged police encounter if he told the court that he had been tortured, according to CDI. They also warned him that he should not act as if he were in any pain in court.

The court, however, found him unable to stand and sent him to Allama Iqbal Memorial Hospital in Sialkot for medical examination. Gujranwala police therefore had to leave him. But police did not tell Masih or CDI staff which police station was keeping Masih in its custody at the hospital.

With the help of the American Center for Law and Justice, CDI filed a case in the Gujranwala Sessions court for Masih's bail and also provided some assistance for his medical treatment.

On June 16, the Sadar police station investigating officer told the court that police under his command were not detaining Masih, but that the Sialkot police were. Because the Gujranwala police were not detaining him, he argued, bail orders issued on March 23 for Masih's release pertained to Sialkot and therefore Masih's police custody in the hospital was illegal.

"The police have been keeping us in the dark so that we could never pursue the case in the right direction," said CDI's Qayyum. "How can a brutally tortured patient even heal their wounds in such mental agony when his hand is always tied in chains, and two policemen are maintaining a 24-hour watch over him?"

The researcher said he maintained hope that the judicial system would provide Masih relief from his agony, which has taken its toll on his family as well. Masih has three children that he has pulled from school due to lack of money.

His wife is illiterate and cannot make a living, CDI officials said, adding that Masih's four married sisters are the main sources of his financial support.

Muslims attack Pakistani pastor's home, relatives

After shooting into air, assailants strike mother, sister-in-law with rifle butts

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (12.06.2009) / HRWF (13.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - In a growing culture of violence here, a traffic incident in Punjab Province this month led to Muslim assailants later mounting an attack on the home of a Christian pastor they have increasingly resented for his evangelism and justice ministries. The attackers threatened more violence if the pastor does not drop assault charges.

A few of the 17 assailants struck the mother and sister-in-law of pastor Riaz Masih with rifle butts after the pastor's brother, who lives at the same multi-housing complex as Masih in Kila Sardar Shah, Sheikhpura district, on June 1 complained to a local councilor about the official nearly driving into his sons. Christian leaders said the roadside incident was only the fuse igniting hostilities that have grown due to meetings held by Christ for All Nations Ministries (CANM).

The meetings have attracted many youths, including some Muslims. Pastor Masih is national coordinator of CANM, a self-supported church-planting ministry. Saqib Munawar, chairman of CANM, said the attack on the pastor's home in the remote village is an indication that as Islamic extremism rises amid a military attempt to flush Islamic militants from the Swat Valley in the country's northwest, a growing culture of violence means minor incidents more easily erupt into attacks.

"As the Swat operation is going on, hostilities against Christians are on the rise," Munawar said. "Extremism, which has flourished in the last few decades, is now creating problems for all Pakistanis. This attitude has promoted violence in the country."

Pakistanis are becoming more violent, he said, and extremism has increased partially in response to evangelism efforts by Christians, he said.

In the triggering incident, pastor Masih's 17- and 18-year-old nephews were standing on the side of a road with their backs to traffic in Kila Sardar Shah when Malik Younus, a village councilor, passed in a vehicle that nearly struck them. The teenagers immediately complained to Younus that he should have at least honked to warn them to step aside.

Younus got out of his vehicle and beat them, Munawar said. They complained to their father, Mushtaq Masih, who then called Younus. Younus threatened to beat them again, and Mushtaq Masih responded that he would have no choice but to call police. Younus became furious, according to Munawar.

Within an hour Younus, his brother Malik Falak Sher and 15 other men armed with automatic weapons and wooden clubs arrived at the multi-family complex where Pastor Masih and his brothers live with their families. The pastor was some distance from home when his 12-year-old daughter called and told him that the Muslim attackers were outside firing into the air.

Rushing to the scene, Masih approached the house from the backyard as the assailants were breaking down the main gate. The pastor managed to lock himself with members of his family inside a room, but his sister-in-law – wife of his younger brother Ilias Masih – and his mother were outside at the time.

Having broken down the main gate and wall and had entered the courtyard, the assailants struck the two women with rifle butts and demanded to know where the boys and their father were. Pastor's Masih's brother, Mushtaq Masih, had also locked himself and his family in a room. The attackers were trying to break down the doors of rooms in pastor Masih's home when one of them called off the assault and they left.

The family reported the assault to police, but officers have done nothing as they have close ties with the attackers – and the assailants also have links with various local government leaders, Munawar said. The intruding Muslims warned pastor Masih and his family that if they contacted police and media, they would face "retribution."

The Station House Officer told Compass that Younus and his cohorts had been released on bail; he would not comment further.

Munawar said the Masih families will likely seek a settlement instead of jail terms.

"The family will probably go for an out-of-court settlement, as they have to live," he said. "However, fears are that such flare-ups may hit back, which would certainly hamper our evangelical efforts."

Rumors spread that a former member of the Punjab Assembly, Agha Gull, was involved in the traffic incident, but Gull told Compass that he was in Iraq at the time of the incident and had nothing to do with it. Gull said someone told him that a clash took place on the road, but that "none of the parties came to me."

Justice Ministry

Certain that the remote village Muslims would not have access to Compass news, pastor Masih told Compass that the antagonists were upset with him also over his efforts to take

back lands stolen from Christian families. There are four Christian families in the village of 40 to 50 families.

The Christian villagers had paid for land they have lived on since 1989, but they never received documents for the transfer, leaving the real estate in the hands of Muslim businessman Syed Izhar Shah – whom villagers say is involved in land theft in collaboration with those who instigated the June 1 attack, Younus and his brother Sher.

Last year pastor Masih offered 20,000 rupees (US\$250) to the landowner to legally transfer the property with proper documentation, but the owner declined. Pastor Masih's father has also paid some 10,000 rupees for his share of the land. Additionally, Akram Masih, who heads one of the four Christian families in the area, has paid an additional 27,000 rupees (US\$335) in an effort to legally obtain his share of the land, but the landowner forbid him to take possession as well.

Younus and Sher are behind a land-grab designed to drive the few Christian families from the area, pastor Masih said. They have illegally taken over a nearby, eight-acre tract of land zoned for a housing tract called Royal Town. Christian villagers had paid for this land also in 1989 – and also without receiving documentation – and the legal land owner, Syed Izhar Shah, is pressuring them to either pay the current price or leave the village, pastor Masih said.

"The attack has been unleashed on the weakest, because there are only four Christian families living in this village," said pastor Masih. "They are vexing us so that we leave the area."

Pastor Munawar said that anti-Christian hostilities resulted in the cancellation of CANM's youth program, which was scheduled for last Monday (June 8).

"The fate of our next program, scheduled on June 21, is also hanging in balance," he said.

Munawar added that last year's annual youth program, held in May, had been secured by armed Christians after an area Muslim tipped them off that their worship could be targeted. The guards were provided licensed .222 Remington rifles.

Pakistani non-Muslims are forced to pay Islamic tax in Khyber Agency

Minorities Concern of Pakistan (03.06.2009) / HRWF (04.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Bara-based Lashkar-e-Islam (LI, an Islamic militant group) has imposed jazia, an Islamic tax, to the non-Muslim communities, including Sikhs, Hindus and Christians living in Khyber Agency, a tribal agency of North West Frontier Post (NWFP) near Afghanistan's border and which is under the control of militants.

"Sources said LI had asked the non-Muslim communities in Bara, Chora, Karamna, Bazaar Zakhakhel and Tirah Valley of Khyber Agency to pay jazia or leave the agency," daily The News reported on June 3. The sources said the warning came from LI on May 31 following which the community agreed to pay the tax instead of leaving the area, where they are living for decades.

The minority communities had many meetings with the local militant group but LI was not ready to give any concession to the minority community. They were told that they are not Muslim so they have to pay jazia.

The media reports say that only women, children and handicapped persons had been exempted from paying the tax, while other members of the communities would be bound to pay Rs1,000 (US\$12.5) per head annually.

Jazia is an Islamic tax which is being imposed by an Islamic state to its non-Muslim subjects. Though Pakistan is an Islamic state, the state has never imposed jazia to its religious minorities. Some radical Muslim religious leaders have been demanded for it but this undemocratic demand never gets public support.

Earlier in April this year, Taliban in Hangu, part of another tribal agency controlled by Taliban, forced Sikh families for jazia. They were told that either they all convert, leave the area or they pay jazia. The Taliban told Sikh community that said they were minority so they must pay the head tax for living in the area in under the rule of Sharia, Islamic law. Following the Taliban's threat, many Sikh families, of the Feroze Khel area of Merozai in Lower Orakzai Agency, fled to the nearby areas.

The Taliban had also forcibly occupied shops of two Sikh businessmen and houses of several Sikhs to force them to pay jazia. Conversely, some of the families paid Rs 20 million to Taliban. After getting jaziya tax, the Taliban released Sikh leader Sardar Saiwang Singh and vacated the community's houses.

According to Dawn, a Pakistani English daily, of May 19, the tribal administration on the directives of federal government had assigned the task of holding peace talks with the deputy chief of Tehrek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Hakeemullah Mehsud. "They would make efforts to pave the way for rehabilitation of Sikh families in the area where they had been living for centuries," the newspaper added.

However, so far there is no development in this regards and Sikhs are still living as refugee in Peshawar, capital city of NWFP, and other part of the province. ###

Aftab Mughal

Editor

Minorities Concern of Pakistan

June 3, 2009

Islamic radicals storm Pakistani 'blasphemy' hearing

Christian couple on trial; member of prosecution team threatens to kill wife

By Roger Elliott

Compass Direct (29.05.2009) / HRWF (30.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Radical Pakistani Muslims in a town outside of Lahore this month overran a courtroom in hopes of swaying a judge in a "blasphemy" case against a Christian couple, and a member of the prosecution later threatened to kill the wife.

Some 50 molvis (Muslim clergy) on May 14 burst into the courtroom in Mustafabad, where a bail hearing was taking place in the case against Munir Masih and his wife Ruqiya Bibi, according to the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS).

"Nobody could stop them as they rushed into the court," said CLAAS's Tahir Gull, sole representative for the accused. "They said, 'No non-Muslim has the right to keep a Quran in his house, they have done this so they are liable to be punished.'"

Masih and Bibi, both in their 30s, were originally accused under section 295-B of Pakistan's penal code with defiling the Quran by touching it with unwashed hands on Dec. 8 of last year. Masih was taken to prison and remained there until Jan. 22, when a Muslim neighbor who had asked him to store some of his possessions, including his Quran, testified on his behalf and the case was dropped.

The complainant, Mohammad Nawaz, subsequently filed another accusation on Feb. 12, this time under 295-C, blasphemy against Muhammad, Islam's prophet. This charge carries a death sentence, whereas defiling the Quran calls for life imprisonment.

Despite pressure from the crowd of clerics, Judge Shafqat Ali – also a molvi – granted the couple bail. Following the hearing, however, a member of the prosecution team approached Bibi outside the courtroom and threatened to kill her.

"Ruqiya was waiting outside the court," said Gull, "and one man came and said, 'Whatever the decision, we will kill you.'"

A prosecution lawyer read portions of the Quran while presenting his case, he added.

"He was not explaining the law in which the accused were charged," said Gull. "He was trying to influence the court religiously."

Charges of blasphemy are common in Pakistan and particularly incendiary, often leading to strong shows of religious zeal. It is not uncommon for sections 295-B and 295-C of the Pakistani penal code to be invoked in retaliation for personal grievances.

"It is very easy to grab any person for religious reasons," said Parvez Choudhry, chairman of Legal Aid for the Destitute and Settlement, who specializes in blasphemy cases. "There are many personal cases involving property, or money, or business that motivate the complainant against the accused person. All the cases are falsely charged."

Pakistan's blasphemy laws have come under heavy fire from international rights groups. Any private citizen can file blasphemy charges, destroying reputation and livelihood. The charge can possibly lead to the death penalty in the conservative Islamic country.

Masih, who before his initial arrest had been a day laborer, is no longer able to find work due to the stigma of the blasphemy accusation.

"There is a need to repeal these sections [295-B and 295-C]," said Choudhry. "This is considered a draconian law."

Section 295-C carries a death sentence for anyone found "by words or visible representation or by an imputation or insinuation, directly or indirectly, [to have] defiled the name of the Muhammad of Islam."

Choudhry suggested that just correcting the vagueness of this definition would go a long way toward reducing its frequent misuse.

"The word 'indirect' should be repealed – this is wrong, unconstitutional," he said. "They have no value in the Evidence Act of Pakistan. The Evidence Act states that there needs to be direct evidence for a conviction."

The next court date has not yet been assigned, but Gull said he is confident about securing an acquittal.

"We have a good case on our side," he told Compass. "I am very optimistic."

Pastors in Pakistan arrested for use of loudspeakers

Police claim amplified Easter Sunday service defamed Islam

By Michael Larson

Compass Direct (27.05.2009) / HRWF (28.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Nine pastors from two neighboring villages in Pakistan could face prison time for using loudspeakers to broadcast prayers and sermons from their churches on Easter Sunday.

Martinpur and Youngsnabad, 150 kilometers (93 miles) east of Lahore, are majority Christian villages. The nine pastors who lead congregations there say that local Muslim security forces have twisted the law to solicit a bribe.

Police arrested and detained Hafeez Gill, Fahim John, Maksud Ulkaq, and a catechist from the Catholic Church in Youngsnabad identified only as Saqab at 10 a.m. on May 16. While en route to the police station, the officers told them they would be released if they offered a bribe, according to the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS). The pastors refused and were detained, but following a public outcry from their parishioners they were released at 2:30 p.m.

Reports indicate the arrest was premeditated. A leader in the village council invited the pastors to his house for a meeting, but when they arrived in the morning local police were waiting for them.

They were taken to the police station, where Station House Officer Mirza Latif showed them two First Instance Reports (FIR) registered on May 11 claiming they had misused their speakers. The FIRs, however, state the pastors misused the speakers on Easter Sunday, which happened nearly a month earlier.

The FIRs accused the pastors of misusing their loudspeakers under Section 3/4 of the Amplifier Act. Their attorney said the reasons for their arrest were both religiously and financially motivated.

Police claimed that the church leaders had used their loudspeakers to amplify messages defaming Islam. The FIRs, however, make no mention of the content of their remarks.

"The police wanted to cause humiliation to the pastors and were also asking for money," said CLAAS attorney Akhbar Durrani.

The case was registered by a special branch of local police forces charging the four Youngsnabad pastors. On the same day, they filed charges against the five pastors in Martinpur: Shahazad Kamarul-Zaman, Mumbarab Kuhram, Hanuk Daniel, Amar Sohail, and a fifth pastor unnamed in the police report.

Nasir Bahatti, president of the Youth Welfare Association in Youngsnabad, a Christian social organization, said the church had permission to amplify the service and that the arrests were religiously motivated.

"There is no reason to ban the loudspeaker," he said. "They are banning our worship and prayer. But we have permission [to use them] on particular days such as Christmas and Easter."

If the FIRs are not withdrawn, the pastors will go to court over the alleged loudspeaker violation. Police released them from jail on May 16 under the condition that they obtain bail at an upcoming hearing.

The church loudspeakers broadcasted the church prayers and sermon for villagers unable to attend the service, as is custom in some Christian villages. Pakistani law limits the use of loudspeakers in Christian worship services to a specific time allotment (and usually to villages and towns with a small Muslim population), but these restrictions were not enforced in the almost-entirely Christian villages of Youngsnabad and Martinpur.

Few such restrictions, however, are placed on Pakistani mosques. The five daily calls to prayer, Friday sermons, and Quran recitations on Islamic holidays are frequently amplified on loudspeakers. The double standard follows a traditional Islamic dictum in which church bells were not allowed to ring in areas under Islamic rule.

"The Muslims in this nation can worship according to their prayer method, so why can't we if we are all given equal rights?" Bahatti said.

The standard of living is relatively high in these villages due to a well-educated population. There are longstanding missionary schools in the villages, and much of the population has lived abroad. English missionaries founded Youngsnabad and Martinpur 120 years ago during British colonial occupation.

Some rights groups worry that the harassment of Pakistani Christians in villages such as Martinpur and Youngsnabad could mean deteriorating conditions for religious minorities in areas once considered secure.

CLAAS reported that vandals completely ransacked a church in Bannu Cantt, in the North West Frontier Province, on May 12. They destroyed the altar, burned Bibles, and broke pews. Although the city is located in a province that borders Afghanistan, where Taliban rebels have been active, it was thought to be a relatively secure area, according to the report.

Pakistan remains in turmoil as the military moves into Swat Valley to uproot the Taliban, which has established Islamic law (sharia) in the embattled area. An estimated 2 million Pakistanis have become refugees by fleeing the area after a government evacuation order.

Pakistan's religious minorities report violence

By Kathy Gannon (AP, May 13, 2009)

AP (13.05.2009) / HRWF (14.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Fauzia Abrar had finally gotten her crying baby to sleep when screaming men pounded on the steel doors of her home in the mostly Christian slum in the port city of Karachi.

Suddenly she heard shots, and the screaming grew louder: "Long live Taliban! Death to infidels!"

The men forced their way into her house, hurled loose tiles and a glass at her and fired a shot. She fainted.

As the Taliban gains a stronger foothold in Pakistan, increasingly violent assaults against religious minorities are further evidence of its growing power and influence. While the Taliban does not carry out all of the attacks, extremist elements inspired by the group will sometimes act in its name.

These attacks add to the instability of an already highly unstable country and also show how Pakistan, supposed to be a U.S. ally in the fight against Islamic extremism, is now itself increasingly threatened by extremists.

In dozens of interviews from Karachi to Peshawar, Christians, Sikhs and Hindus told of attacks and threats and expressed an overwhelming sense of fear. Minority Rights Group International, a watchdog organization, ranked Pakistan last year as the world's top country for major increases in threats to minorities from 2007-along with Sri Lanka, which is embroiled in civil war. The group lists Pakistan as seventh on the list of 10 most dangerous countries for minorities, after Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar and Congo.

"In Pakistan today there is a lot of feeling of fear by all the minorities," said the Rev. Richard D'Souza of St. Jude Church in Karachi. "We feel we have no protection."

The trouble in D'Souza's parish started with bold blue graffiti on the church walls praising the Taliban and Islamic law, and condemning Christians as infidels. Young Christians in the neighborhood protested.

Within days, about 25 burly men with shaggy beards rampaged through the neighborhood, beating Christians, pelting women with stones and setting fire to the doors of houses and to meager possessions. An 11-year-old boy was killed, and several people were wounded.

"The police never helped. None of us had weapons. The police just stood there," said 26-year-old Imran Masih, who spent 10 days in the hospital after a bullet pierced his neck.

Dozens of Christian families fled. One man who stayed, Sohail Masih, showed what is left of the family's two Bibles and a Sunday school book-a seared and crumbled mass of paper. He had wrapped it in plastic bags and hidden it, in case evidence was ever needed.

D'Souza said the parish is thinking of forming its own armed youth brigades to patrol Christian areas. When he asked the government for armored personnel carriers, he said, two bored-looking policemen showed up for the Easter Sunday service and were gone the next morning.

Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's minister for minorities affairs, said the government is trying to stop the Taliban through military operations.

"I don't say minorities are not worried. They have a genuine concern. They have been attacked," said Bhatti, a Christian. "The Taliban say non-Muslims are infidels, and the people who are misguided zealots can interpret this in any way. Minorities can be easy and soft targets of these extremists, but these Taliban are committing such violent acts that everyone feels fear in their presence-the minority and the majority in Pakistan."

Religious minorities represent about 5 percent of Pakistan's 160 million people, according to the CIA World Factbook. But Michael Javed, director of a peace council and a minister in southern Sindh, charged that census takers intentionally keep minority figures low to

deny them greater representation. Christians alone represent 5 to 6 percent of the population, he said.

Javed said he has been told by militants to take the cross off his schools in Karachi, and has refused. Frightened Christians are trying to arm themselves, he said, pulling out a bulging file with more than 60 applications to buy weapons.

"It has never happened in the past like this. Today we feel we have no future. They want us to hide, but we won't," he said.

Even Shiite Muslims have come under attack as the Sunni Taliban tears through the tribal areas. In the past two years, the Taliban has embraced a violently anti-Shiite group, Lashkar-e-Janghvi, unleashing a fresh wave of bitter bloodletting. More than 500 Shiite Muslims in the Kurram tribal agency have been killed in daily attacks.

Editorials in local newspapers have warned of the threat to minorities and predicted that the brutality will eventually reach the larger population. In an April letter to the prime minister and president, Lahore Archbishop Lawrence Saldanha said allowing Islamic law in the violent Swat Valley would give license to "trigger-happy Taliban (and further) erode constitutional protections for minorities and women."

The Taliban issued an ultimatum in March to the elders of more than 25 Sikh families in the Orakzai tribal agency near the Afghan border: Convert to Islam, join the jihad or pay 5 billion rupees-roughly \$62 million-for protection.

"We couldn't pay that amount. We were farmers," said a young Sikh who asked to be identified only as Singh, because he was too terrified to give his full name or location. He fidgeted nervously, and his voice became little more than a whisper as he recalled the Taliban's threat to take a Sikh leader to South Waziristan to decide his fate if the extortion money wasn't paid.

The villagers persuaded the Taliban to reduce the amount to 12 million rupees or \$150,000-still a princely sum for the Sikh community. But Singh said they raised enough money to get their elder released, with a promise to pay the rest by March 29.

On March 28, he said, the Sikhs paid the full amount, and the Taliban promised to protect them anywhere in Pakistan. But by 10 p.m. that day, the Taliban had told Sikh elders they were preparing to attack.

By 2 a.m., the elders had packed everyone into cars and trucks, and more than 150 Sikhs fled to Peshawar, the provincial capital of the northwest.

"What are we to do? We have nothing," Singh said. "We have asked the government of Pakistan, either relocate us to somewhere safe or send us to India."

The lives of Hindus are also in danger, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Last month, extremists attacked a Hindu Holi religious festival not far from the border with India, setting fire to a Hindu temple and destroying several shops. And last year, a young Hindu worker was beaten to death at a factory in Karachi by fellow workers who accused him of insulting Islam.

Although no figures are available, anecdotal evidence and human rights groups say attacks against Hindus have risen in the last two years, with temples and worshippers targeted especially in Sindh province, where Karachi is located.

"We are under more and more of a threat because of these extremists, but we ourselves feel if we take the wrong step, even to tell of the wrong things, then it will be death for

us," said Amarnath Motumal, a lawyer and head of the Karachi Hindu Panchayat, representing Hindus. "We worry about the future of our families and our children here in Pakistan-all of us (minorities) do today because of these extremists."

Lawyer threatens to kill Pakistani charged with 'blasphemy'

Bail denied to Christian activist for his own safety; judge also under fire

By Michael Larson

Compass Direct (06.05.2009) / HRWF (07.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Pakistani Christian charged with abetting blasphemy against Islam was denied bail for his own safety last week after an Islamist lawyer allegedly threatened his life in a court hearing.

Hector Aleem, 51, remains in Adiyala Jail in Rawalpindi, near Pakistan's capital of Islamabad. Judge Mustafa Tanveer dismissed his bail application at a court session on Thursday (April 30).

"If the judge does not punish Aleem according to the law, then [we] will kill him ourselves," said Tariq Dhamal, an attorney for the unnamed complainant, according to a report by the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS).

Police arrested Aleem last November when a Muslim scholar received a text message insulting the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Authorities charged Aleem with blasphemy and abetting blasphemy, sections 295(c) and 109(bb) respectively of the Pakistani criminal code.

Court evidence shows the text message came from an unlisted phone number, not Aleem's. At an April 25 hearing, Investigating Officer Zafer Iqbal said he had concluded that evidence proved Aleem's innocence. Iqbal's investigation, along with a February judicial decision, resulted in charges of blaspheming Islam being dropped. The charge of abetting blasphemy still stands.

Nevertheless, at the April 25 hearing prosecuting attorneys asserted that Aleem was guilty of blasphemy on grounds that "he is a Christian and can make blasphemous comments about the prophet Muhammad," according to Katherine Sapna, a field officer for CLAAS.

Aleem's lawyer, Malik Tafik, said he has filed for upcoming hearings to be closed to the public for fear that Muslim fanatics could try to kill his Christian client. Tafik will present another bail application in the high court of Islamabad on May 14.

Tafik, a Muslim, has come under pressure from the Rawalpindi Bar for taking on the case of a Christian accused of blasphemy. The bar has filed an application against him for handling the case.

Dhamal, the lawyer who allegedly made the death threat against Aleem, is a member of Sunni Tehreek, an Islamist political movement involved in violent sectarian clashes in the last decade.

In the April 25 hearing, five lawyers and 180 Islamist protestors gathered around the courthouse. Tafik said he believes the crowds hoped to intimidate the judge into declaring Aleem guilty. More than 100 protestors have congregated at previous hearings,

shouting that Aleem's life would not be spared and he should be handed over to the police.

Tafik said the judge is afraid to rule in favor of Aleem for fear of his life from Rawalpindi Islamists.

"The judge is under pressure and not deciding the case based on merits," Tafik said. "He is ready to hear on merits, but the lawyers are just [acting] on the basis of Islamization."

Pakistan's blasphemy laws have come under heavy fire from international rights groups. Any private citizen can file blasphemy charges, and they have been used in petty disputes as a means of retaliation as they can destroy reputation, livelihood and possibly lead to the death penalty in the conservative Islamic country.

Before his arrest, Aleem led human rights campaigns on behalf of Christians, particularly a land dispute between a congregation and the Rawalpindi Water and Sanitation Agency, which wanted to demolish their church building.

More Muslims than Christians are charged with blasphemy in Pakistan. In 2008 there were 13 cases registered against Muslims in Punjab province, where Aleem resides, and only six against Christians.

Boy Dies

Insulting Islam is a dangerous activity in the conservative nation of 170 million, but with the spread of the Taliban, non-Muslims fear their very existence will make them a target to fundamentalists.

On April 22 Christians in Taiser town, near Karachi, noticed on the walls of their church graffiti that read, "Long Live the Taliban" and calls for Christians to either convert to Islam or pay the jizya, a poll tax under sharia (Islamic law) paid by non-Muslims for protection if they decline to convert.

Armed men arrived on the scene and opened fire on Christians who were erasing the graffiti, injuring five. An 11-year-old boy shot in the attack, Irfan Masih, has reportedly since died from his injuries (see www.compassdirect.org, "Taliban-Inspired Attacks Hit Christians," April 27).

Security forces fear that sectarian violence could erupt in the port city of Karachi. They have banned public gatherings and processions, according to Release International aid agency.

Taliban demolishes 11 homes of Sikh community

PTI (30.04.2009) / HRWF (01.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Taliban militants have demolished 11 homes of members of the minority Sikh community in Pakistan's troubled Aurakzai tribal region after they failed to pay 'jiziya' or a tax levied on non-Muslims.

The houses were destroyed on the orders of Taliban commander Hakeemullah Mehsud, the head of the militants in Aurakzai Agency and a deputy of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan chief Baitullah Mehsud.

The militants acted after a deadline set by them for payment of 'jiziya' by the Sikhs expired on Wednesday. The Sikhs held a meeting at Merozai on Wednesday to discuss

the possibility of leaving the area but were unable to reach a decision, media reports said.

Though the Sikhs have been living in Aurakzai Agency for centuries, the Taliban asked them earlier this month to pay Rs 50 million a year as jiziya. The militants claimed this was being done as Shariah or Islamic law had been enforced in the area and all non-Muslims had to pay "protection money".

There are about 35 Sikh families living in Ferozkhel near Merozai in Aurakzai Agency. The Taliban occupied two shops and three homes of Sikhs in Ferozkhel on Tuesday to pressure the community into paying jiziya.

Several tribal families belonging to a religious sect have also migrated from Aurakzai Agency to nearby Kohat and Hangu districts of North West Frontier Province due to fear of attacks by the Taliban.

Though the Sikhs were initially provided protection in keeping with Pashtun traditions by the Manikhel tribe, the tribesmen are fearful of taking on the Taliban.

In October last year, over 100 people were killed in a suicide attack on a tribal jirga in Aurakzai Agency that had gathered to discuss ways to evict the Taliban from the area.

Extremist tide rises in Pakistan

By Pamela Constable

Washington Post (20.04.2009) / HRWF (30.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -A potentially troubling era dawned Sunday in Pakistan's Swat Valley, where a top Islamist militant leader, emboldened by a peace agreement with the federal government, laid out an ambitious plan to bring a "complete Islamic system" to the surrounding northwest region and the entire country.

Speaking to thousands of followers in an address aired live from Swat on national news channels, cleric Sufi Mohammed bluntly defied the constitution and federal judiciary, saying he would not allow any appeals to state courts under the system of sharia, or Islamic law, that will prevail there as a result of the peace accord signed by the president Tuesday.

"The Koran says that supporting an infidel system is a great sin," Mohammed said, referring to Pakistan's modern democratic institutions. He declared that in Swat, home to 1.5 million people, all "un-Islamic laws and customs will be abolished," and he suggested that the official imprimatur on the agreement would pave the way for sharia to be installed in other areas.

Mohammed's dramatic speech echoed a rousing sermon in Islamabad on Friday by another radical cleric, Maulana Abdul Aziz, who appeared at the Red Mosque in the capital after nearly two years in detention and urged several thousand chanting followers to launch a crusade for sharia nationwide.

Together, these rallying cries seemed to create an arc of radical religious energy between the turbulent, Taliban-plagued northwest region and the increasingly vulnerable federal capital, less than 100 miles to the east. They also appeared to pose a direct, unprecedented religious challenge to modern state authority in the Muslim nation of 176 million.

"The government made a big mistake to give these guys legal cover for their agenda. Now they are going to be battle-ready to struggle for the soul of Pakistan," said Rifaat Hussain, a professor of security studies at Quaid-i-Azam university here. He predicted a further surge in the suicide bombings that have recently become an almost daily occurrence across the country. Two recent bombings at security checkpoints in the northwest killed more than 40 people.

Richard C. Holbrooke, the U.S. special envoy to the region, said in an interview broadcast Sunday on CNN that the decision by insurgents to keep fighting in spite of the peace deal should be a "wake-up call to everybody in Pakistan that you can't deal with these people by giving away territory as they creep closer and closer to the populated centers of the Punjab and Islamabad."

Also Sunday, a suspected U.S. missile strike killed three people at a Taliban compound in the South Waziristan tribal region; such attacks have become a powerful recruitment tool for extremist groups in Pakistan as anti-American sentiment builds.

The government agreed to Mohammed's demands in an effort to halt violent intimidation by Taliban forces that the army was unable to quell despite months of operations in the former tourist haven. In recent interviews, Swati leaders and refugees described armed men in black turbans whipping suspected thieves on the spot, cutting off the ears and noses of village elders who opposed them, and selling videos of police beheadings.

"We really had no other choice. We had no power to crush the militants, and people were desperate for peace," said Jafar Shah, a Swati legislator. His Awami National Party, though historically secular, sponsored the sharia deal. "Now people are calling us Taliban without beards," he said ruefully, "but it was the only option available."

Provincial and federal officials also hoped their show of good faith would halt further insurgent inroads and buy time for foreign aid programs to shore up the impoverished northwest against the Islamists' message of swift justice and social equality.

Instead, the evidence suggests that the extremist forces have drawn the opposite lesson from their victory in Swat and are gearing up to carry their armed crusade for a punitive, misogynistic form of Islam into new areas. There have been numerous reports of Taliban fighters entering districts south and west of Swat, where they have brandished weapons, bombed and occupied buildings, arrested aid workers, and killed female activists.

"When we achieve our goals in one place, we need to struggle for it in other areas," Taliban spokesman Muslim Khan told Pakistani news services by telephone last week. "Sharia does not permit us to lay down our arms if the government continues anti-Muslim policies." The goal, he said, is to "enforce the rule of Allah on the land of Allah."

In the northwestern town of Mardan, insurgents attacked girls schools, forced CD shops to close, ordered barbers not to shave beards and bombed the office of a nonprofit aid agency, killing a female worker. Taliban commanders accused the agency of "propagating obscenity." Taliban fighters occupied the Buner district for several days, closed a religious shrine and burned DVDs in the streets. They then toured the region in a convoy of trucks, even entering a secured army area while displaying heavy weapons.

"The inescapable reality is that another domino has toppled and the Taliban are a step closer to Islamabad," the Pakistan-based News International newspaper warned last week after the Buner takeover. The paper compared Pakistan to Vietnam: a weak and corrupt state being "nibbled away" by determined insurgents: "The Taliban have the upper hand, and they know it."

Surprisingly, there has been little official or public protest against the creeping tide of Islamist extremism. Analysts said this is partly because of fear of retaliation and partly because of strong religious sentiments that make Pakistanis reluctant to criticize fellow Muslims.

Even in especially shocking cases, such as the public flogging of a Swati girl suspected of having an affair, the response from national leaders was a muddle of denial and obfuscation. Some said the incident, which surfaced last month on a videotape, had been staged to sabotage the peace deal. Others said it was a minor issue compared with U.S. cross-border missile strikes.

A handful of influential Pakistanis have begun to raise the alarm, warning in newspaper columns or speeches that government and society need to confront the enemy within and acknowledge the difference between conventional sharia and the crude, brutally enforced Taliban version of an extremist Islamist state.

"In Swat they got their system imposed at gunpoint, and now they are ready to Talibanize the whole country," Altaf Hussain, the exiled head of the Muttahida Qaumi Majlis political party, said at a teleconference of Muslim clerics in Karachi on Sunday. Denouncing the insurgents' abusive and autocratic methods, he said, "We have to decide between our country and the Taliban."

Sharia in Pakistan, as in Afghanistan, exists in tandem with a modern legal code but does not supersede it. Sharia courts rule on certain religious and moral issues, while other cases are tried by regular courts. Mohammed, Aziz and other radicals espouse a more severe version like the one Taliban rulers imposed on Afghanistan in the 1990s, which segregates women and imposes harsh punishments.

Supporters of the Swat agreement pointed out that residents have been demanding sharia for years to replace the slow, corrupt justice system. But Swati leaders said that the local version of Islamic law was traditionally moderate and that in elections last year Swatis voted overwhelmingly for two secular parties.

Indeed, older natives of Swat like to recall earlier days when serenity and tolerance prevailed in the region of apple orchards, forested hills and glacial streams. Tourists from Japan and Europe came to explore ancient Buddhist ruins, while residents practiced a timeless mix of tribal customs and Islamic faith.

"There was something in the soil that made the people soft," said Asad Khan, a Swat native in his 40s who lives in the city of Peshawar. "Our culture was one of civilized hospitality. Everyone was a Muslim, but almost no one was a fundamentalist. The climate was not good for harsh people and ideas."

This week, after the peace accord was endorsed, officials and pro-government news media described the atmosphere in Swat as relieved and heading back to normalcy. But several people who visited the Swati capital of Mingora this week said they saw worried faces, no women in the markets, and clusters of black-turbaned men watching everyone closely.

"Things are confused and unclear. People have suffered a lot, and they are desperate for peace, but they don't know if it will last," said Afzal Khan Lala, a provincial legislator, reached by phone in Mingora. "If the Taliban are sincere, then peace should prevail. But if they have ulterior aims and seek supremacy over the state, I doubt peace will come to Swat."

Two Christians acquitted Of 'blasphemy'

Compass Direct News (21.03.2009) / HRWF (24.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - After more than two years in a Pakistani jail, two elderly Christian men convicted of "blasphemy" against the Quran were acquitted on Thursday (April 16) when a high court in Lahore overturned their 10-year sentence.

James Masih, 67, and Buta Masih, 72, were accused of burning pages from the Quran in October 2006 and were also tried under an anti-terrorism law because their actions were deemed to have created fear and panic. In a case that drew crowds of Islamic fanatics, they were convicted on Nov. 25, 2006 of blaspheming Islam's sacred book.

The pair has claimed from the start that the blasphemy charges were fabricated due to a dispute over a plot of land that a Muslim neighbor wanted James Masih to sell.

"It happens many times, it is always a false story due to some other enmity," said Father Yaqub Yousaf, the men's parish priest. "Pastors and priests, we tell them that it is better not to speak on religion with the Muslims, not to say anything that can hurt them, so normally they don't do that."

After rumors erupted that the two men had burned pages of the Quran on Oct. 8, 2006, some 500 Muslims attempted to kill them. Police arrested the two Christians and held off the crowds, which stayed outside the police station through the night.

The Christian men launched an appeal soon after their conviction and have since remained in prison.

"I appeared in court 27 times during the appeal," said Khalil Tahir Sindhu, their lawyer. "Most of the time the judges postponed the case, saying, 'We will hear the case next time.'"

Sindhu told Compass that religious bias and public pressure led to the judge's original decision to sentence the men and could have had much to do with the delays in hearing the appeal.

"At the last hearing [Dec. 15, 2008], the judge reserved judgment, which according to law has to be given within three months," he said. "But it was over three months, so I went to court and told him, 'These are old men and they are sick, so please announce the judgment.'"

James Masih was hospitalized three times during his internment, receiving treatment for a chest infection.

"Jail is totally different [in Pakistan], you hardly have proper food, and no facilities," said Fr. Yousaf. Sources said both men were traumatized by their ordeal, an effect also felt keenly by their families, who were rarely able to visit.

Permanent stigma

Articles 295-B and 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code respectively prescribe life imprisonment for desecrating the Quran and death for insulting Muhammad, the prophet of Islam.

Although the law has not been implemented to the full extent of capital punishment or life in prison since its introduction in 1986, there have been more than 20 deaths recorded in blasphemy-related violence.

Even after their acquittal and release, Sindhu said, the men will not be able to immediately return home.

"It is dangerous now, we will not send them to their home," said Sindhu. "We will keep them away for one to two months until the situation changes. Anyone can kill them."

Christians previously accused of blasphemy continued to experience prejudice and sometimes violence even after being cleared of the charges.

"It is difficult for the blasphemy accused to find work," commented Wasim Muntizar from the Lahore-based Center for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement. "Churches are afraid to help them, because fanatics won't hesitate to kill the 'blasphemer' and attack the church."

Although the families of James and Buta Masih remain excited at the prospect of the pair's upcoming return home, Fr. Yousaf has urged them to keep their celebrations muted.

"They are excited, yes, but I told them not to express so strongly their joy about it," he said. "I requested them to keep it secret, because it may not be safe – some of the Muslims may say the court has not taken the right decision. In the past people have been killed after being acquitted."

Christians brace for Sharia in Pakistan's Swat valley

Accepting Islamic law in exchange for peace leaves many uncertain, fearful

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct News (27.03.2009) / HRWF (28.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Just over a month since Pakistan's fertile Swat Valley turned into a Taliban stronghold where sharia (Islamic law) rules, the fate of the remaining Christians in the area is uncertain.

Last month, in an effort to end a bloody two-year battle, the Islamabad administration struck a deal with Taliban forces surrendering all governance of Swat Valley in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Sources told Compass that after the violence that has killed and displaced hundreds, an estimated 500 Christians remain in the area. Traditionally these have been low-skilled workers, but younger, more educated Christians work as nurses, teachers and in various other professions.

The sole Church of Pakistan congregation in Swat, consisting of 40 families, has been renting space for nearly 100 years. The government has never given them permission to buy land in order to build a church building.

An associate pastor of the church in central Swat told Yousaf Benjamin of the National Commission for Justice and Peace that with the bombing of girls schools at the end of last year, all Christian families migrated to nearby districts. After the peace deal and with guarded hope for normalcy and continued education for their children, most of the families have returned to their homes but are reluctant to attend church.

The associate pastor, who requested anonymity, today told sources that "people don't come to the church as they used to come before." He said that although the Taliban has

made promises of peace, the Christian community has yet to believe the Muslim extremists will hold to them.

"The people don't rely on Taliban assurances," said Benjamin.

Last week the associate pastor met with the third in command of the main Taliban militant umbrella group in Pakistan, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Kari Abdullah, and requested land in order to build a church. Abdullah reportedly agreed, saying that Islam is a religion of peace and equality, and that his group intended to provide equal opportunities to the religious communities of Swat.

The Catholic Church in Swat is located in a school compound that was bombed late last year. Run by nuns and operated under the Catholic Church Peshawar Diocese, the church has been closed for the last two years since insurgents have been fighting government led forces, source said.

Parliamentarian Shahbaz Bhatti said Christians and the few Hindus in Swat valley have lived under terror and harassment by the Taliban since insurgents began efforts to seize control of the region. He met with a delegation of Christians from Swat last month who said they were concerned about their future, but Bhatti said only time will tell how the changes will affect Christians.

"The Christian delegation told me that they favor the peace pact if indeed it can bring peace, stability and security to the people living there," he said. "But they also shared their concern that if there is enforcement of sharia, what will be their future? But we will see how it will be implemented."

Although there have been no direct threats against Christians since the establishment of the peace accord, some advocates fear that it may only be a matter of time.

"These days, there are no reports of persecution in Swat," Lahore-based reporter Felix Qaiser of Asia News told Compass by phone, noting the previous two years of threatening letters, kidnappings and aggression against Christians by Islamic extremists. "But even though since the implementation of sharia there have been no such reports, we are expecting them. We're expecting this because other faiths won't be tolerated."

Qaiser also expressed concern about the treatment of women.

"They won't be allowed to move freely and without veils," he said. "And we're very much concerned about their education there."

In the past year, more than 200 girls schools in Swat were reported to have been burned down or bombed by Islamic extremists.

Remaining girls schools were closed down in January but have been re-opened since the peace agreement in mid-February. Girls under the age of 13 are allowed to attend.

Since the deal was struck, seven new sharia judges have been installed, and earlier this month lawyers were trained in the nuances of Islamic law. Those not trained are not permitted to exercise their profession. As of this week, Non-Governmental Organizations are no longer permitted in the area and vaccinations have been banned.

"These are the first fruits of Islamic law, and we're expecting worse things – Islamic punishment such as cutting off hands, because no one can dictate to them," Qaiser said. "Everything is according to their will and their own interpretation of Islamic law."

Launch Point for Taliban

Analysts and sources on the ground have expressed skepticism in the peace deal brokered by pro-Taliban religious leader Maulana Sufi Muhammad, who is also the leader of Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi. The insurgent, who has long fought for implementation of sharia in the region, has also fought alongside the Taliban against U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

He was imprisoned and released under a peace deal in April 2008 in an effort to restore normalcy in the Swat Valley. Taliban militants in the Swat area are under the leadership of his son-in-law, Maulana Fazlullah.

The agreement to implement sharia triggered alarm around the world that militants will be emboldened in the northwest of Pakistan, a hotbed for Taliban and Al-Qaeda extremists fighting Western forces in Afghanistan and bent on overthrowing its government.

Joe Grieboski of the Institute on Religion and Public Policy said the peace deal makes Talibanization guaranteed by law, rendering it impossible to return to a liberal democracy or any guarantee of fundamental rights.

"The government in essence ceded the region to the Taliban," said Grieboski. "Clerical rule over the region will fulfill the desires of the extremists, and we'll see the region become a copy of what Afghanistan looked like under Taliban rule."

This can only mean, he added, that the Taliban will have more power to promulgate their ideology and power even as the Pakistani administration continues to weaken.

"Unfortunately, this also creates a safe launching off point for Taliban forces to advance politically, militarily and ideologically into other areas of the country," said Grieboski. "The peace deal further demonstrates the impotence of [Asif Ali] Zardari as president."

Grieboski said the peace deal further demonstrates that Pakistani elites – and President Zardari in particular – are less concerned about fundamental rights, freedom and democracy than about establishing a false sense of security in the country.

"This peace deal will not last, as the extremists will demand more and more, and Zardari and the government have placed themselves in a weakened position and will once again have to give in," said Grieboski.

Sohail Johnson, chief coordinator of advocacy group Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan, said he fears that militants in Swat will now be able to freely create training centers and continue to attack the rest of Pakistan.

"They will become stronger, and this will be the greatest threat for Christians living in Pakistan," said Johnson.

Thus far the government has not completely bowed to Taliban demands for establishment of full sharia courts, and it is feared that the insurgents may re-launch violent attacks on civilians until they have full judicial control.

"The question of the mode of implementation has not yet been decided, because the Taliban want their own qazis [sharia judges] and that the government appointed ones should quit," said lawyer Khalid Mahmood, who practices in the NWFP.

Mahmood called the judiciary system in Swat "collapsed" and echoed the fear that violence would spread in the rest of the country.

"They will certainly attack on the neighboring districts," he said.

Earlier today, close to the Swat Valley in Khyber, a suicide bomber demolished a mosque in Jamrud, killing at least 48 people and injuring more than 150 others during Friday prayers. Pakistani security officials reportedly said they suspected the attack was retaliation for attempts to get NATO supplies into Afghanistan to use against Taliban fighters and other Islamist militants.

Muslims attack Christian community in Punjab

AsiaNews (05.03.2009) / HRWF (09.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - One woman has died and 28 people have been injured in an attack on the Presbyterian Christian community in the village of Songo, in the district of Gujranwala, province of Punjab. The attack took place on the evening of March 2: at 8 p.m., a group of Muslim inhabitants opened fire on the faithful who had gathered in the church for prayer. The woman, named Shakeela, died on the spot, while other members of the faithful suffered injuries of various kinds while they were seeking to flee from the bullets or to protect the pastor. The attackers broke the windows of the church, destroyed the Bibles and the other prayer books, and removed the cross from the roof of the building.

The victims of the attacks say that this was a premeditated action, and recount that in the previous weeks they had received a number of threats from the attackers. The authors of the attack have been identified, and a report against them has been filed at the local police station. The Pakistan Christian Post says that for now, the security forces have turned down the request for investigations on the attackers. For this reason, the burial of the woman's body has been delayed, to permit an autopsy in evidence of the attack.

The attack in Songo is added to a long list of violent events that are now being seen more or less everywhere in Punjab and in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). The attacks are carried out by the Taliban, but also by ordinary people, and they are not coming to an end in the Swat Valley, where a fragile ceasefire has been attained by the government, thanks to the concession of introducing sharia in that district and in the district of Malakand.

During the night of March 5, the Taliban blew up 16 CD and DVD stores in Takhtbhai, in the district of Mardan northeast of Peshawar, the capital of the NWFP. It is one of the many places in the province that in recent months have come under the grip of the Taliban. In February, it was the theater of attacks against girls' schools, carried out by Islamic fundamentalists, and in spite of the fact that the agreement between the Taliban and the government provides for the reopening of schools to girls, many are afraid of fresh violence.

Since the beginning of the year, people have been abandoning the Swat Valley by the thousands. These include many families and a number of teachers, who have formally stated that they are going on vacation. One mother who left the district recounts: "All the best teachers from my children's schools have left. I do not think they will go back. According to my relatives there, many children have gone back to school, but there are now too few teachers."

Pakistani Christian charged with 'blasphemy' for text message

Defender of minority rights allegedly framed for making legal challenges in church land dispute

By Michael Larson

Compass Direct (05.02.2009) / HRWF (06.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - More than 100 protestors last week surrounded a Pakistani courthouse and chanted death threats against a Punjabi Christian said to be framed for sending a "blasphemous" text message on his cell phone.

Rawalpindi police arrested Hector Aleem, 51, on Jan. 22 and detained him on charges of sending a text message that insulted the Islamic prophet Muhammad. At his Jan. 27 hearing at the Rawalpindi Sessions Court, crowds gathered and began shouting death threats.

His attorney, Malik Tafik, told Compass that a local man allegedly framed Aleem for the charges because Aleem has made legal challenges on behalf of Christians involved in a land dispute. Aleem directs a small agency that often defends the rights of Christians.

Last November, a scholar associated with the national Islamist political movement Sunni Tehreek received a text message claiming to have come from Aleem. The religious scholar registered blasphemy charges against Aleem on Nov. 28 at the Rawalpindi police station.

Police raided Aleem's house at 1:30 a.m. on Jan. 22 and assaulted him, his wife, and his two daughters. They also stole 50,000 Pakistan rupees (US\$630) worth of valuables and broke pictures of Jesus hanging on their walls, according to a report from the Center for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS).

Authorities charged him with violating sections 295c (blasphemy) and 109bb (abetting) of the Pakistani criminal code. Aleem was transferred to a Rawalpindi anti-terrorism court for a second hearing on Jan. 30, where an even larger crowd of protestors gathered shouting that his life would not be spared. Many of those who came to protest were associated with Sunni Tehreek, which has been involved in violent sectarian clashes with other Islamist movements in the last decade.

"There were about 150 people protesting that Aleem should be handed over to them," Tafik said. "And there were many journalists, two news stations, and lawyers who came out to protest against him."

Aleem is detained at the Adiyala Jail in Rawalpindi. During his incarceration, police have mistreated him and denied him adequate food and access to medicine for his heart condition. He told lawyers that police have not allowed him to meet with his family and referred to him as "choohra" (sweeper), a derogatory term for Pakistani Christians to designate them as the lowest rung of society.

At a hearing at an anti-terrorism court on Monday (Feb. 2), Judge Sakhi Mohammad Kohut exonerated him of blasphemy charges but did not clear him of abetting. A government official told Compass that the judge's decision was heavily influenced by Islamic extremists attending the open court hearing who told the judge, "If you release [Aleem], then we will kill him outside."

At the hearing, the judge implicated the man who allegedly framed Aleem - Bashir Kokar, previously charged multiple times with fraud - accusing him of using his cell

phone to send a blasphemous message against Muhammad. Kokar was charged with blasphemy and arrested later that day. But court evidence shows the original text message came from an unregistered mobile number that pertained to neither Kokar nor Aleem, sources said – exonerating Aleem, but also making it difficult to prove that Kokar framed him. Khushdil Khan Malik, deputy secretary of Pakistan’s Ministry of Human Rights, said he believes the judge implicated Kokar as a scapegoat for the blasphemy charges in order to appease the extremists.

The next hearing will be held in March. Attorney Tafik told Compass he believes Aleem will be cleared of all charges because there is no evidence against him.

Targeted for defending Christian rights

Sources said they believe Aleem was framed due to his social activism as director of a small Non-Governmental Organization that lobbies for the rights of Pakistani Christians in Islamabad.

In November he became involved in a land dispute between a congregation and a local municipality that wanted to demolish their church building. He has been wrongfully implicated in the past for minor offenses, a government deputy said, particularly for his advocacy work against the Capital Development Authority, a municipal works agency that has been charged with unlawful confiscation and destruction of Christian property.

Aleem has been cleared of these minor offenses. The seriousness of the blasphemy charge, however, puts him and his family in danger. Besides his attorney, other legal advocates said they believe he will be cleared of all charges as there is no evidence that he sent the original text message.

Until then, his family is hiding underground due to threats of violence by Muslim extremists, said Joseph Francis, national director of CLAAS. And once he is released, it will be hard for Aleem to return to a normal life in Rawalpindi with the stigma of even unproven charges of blasphemy hanging over his head.

“What will happen after [the trial] is a matter of concern,” said Malik of Pakistan’s human rights ministry. “There have been many incidents of the sudden deaths of people charged with blasphemy.”

As many of those hostile to him are members of Sunni Tehreek who are dispersed throughout Pakistan, he and his family would be targeted by local members of the organization if they fled to another city. The only solution may be to seek asylum in another country, a source told Compass.

Problematic law

Blasphemy has been used frequently in Pakistani law as a tool to silence or intimidate non-Muslims, including another case this week.

Yesterday a pastor, his son, and his father were charged with blasphemy in the village of Baddomehli, 100 kilometers (62 miles) from Lahore. Muslim classmates of pastor Shafik Masih’s teenage son claimed he had a blasphemous pamphlet in his backpack and began to assault him, according to a CLAAS report.

Realizing the danger of sectarian violence, the police chief of the region yesterday called on Christians to seek refuge as local Muslims were assembling a protest.

Christian members of Pakistan’s Parliament have moved to strike the blasphemy laws from the national criminal code.

"In the past, only a superintendent of police could file blasphemy charges," attorney Tafik said. "But now a private person can register a case of blasphemy and it can be misused because anyone can use it."

Discrimination by law

By Aftab Mughal

(05.02.2009) / HRWF (06.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Although the present government of Pakistan shows its commitment to eliminate all discriminatory laws including the blasphemy laws, a major threat to religious minorities and to many Muslims, the misuse of the law is still on the rise. In such a hostile situation, there were some recent positive developments which give little hope that not only religious minorities and the human rights organizations are raising voice against these laws but at the same time many other voices are emerging to challenge their misuse. Nevertheless, these voices are still numerically in a very tiny minority than to the voices who have been supporting these under debated laws. As a result, it is the responsibility of the state to ensure that all citizens of the state live without the fear of intimidation and the laws should provide justice without any discrimination of belief.

However, it is a welcoming statement by the Minister for Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti who told the National Assembly (lower house of the parliament) on Jan. 16 that the government would form a special committee to eliminate all discriminatory laws. In another interview, he said that the government will introduce legislation annulling the country's blasphemy laws. Contrary, there were some Muslim religious leaders who opposed government's intention to touch these laws. They also threaten the government with a strong reaction by the religious lobby of the country.

The blasphemy laws were introduced during the regime of Pakistan's Islamist President General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88). Among these the most debated laws were; Section 295-B and C, Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) which punishes those who disrespect the Quran (the holy book of Muslim) and defame Prophet Muhammad. Life sentence and the death penalty are the only punishments under these laws. Under the existing laws, it is very easy to blame anybody for blasphemy. When somebody is blamed for blasphemy, immediately one's life would be under threat and the police charge the person under these laws without any delay.

Moreover, the civil rights organizations say that the blasphemy laws are used as a weapon to settle personal scores and especially these laws have been used to persecute Christians, Ahmadis, Hindus and even the members of minority Muslim groups. Many innocent people are killed and incarcerated due to the misuse of these laws. Equally, in these sort of incidents the families and as well as the community members of the accused are also threatened, harassed, victimized and tortured by the majority groups. In many cases they are forced to leave their own homes and get refuge somewhere else. According to one report, till mid-2008, 892 Christians and Muslims had been jailed for blasphemy, while 25 others who were accused of blasphemy have been murdered by mobs since the laws were introduced.

Just within the first month of 2009, one Christian, five (5) Ahmadis (four of them minor), and one Muslim were arrested under blasphemy charges. In Rawalpindi, a Christian Hector Haleem, 55, was arrested on Jan. 22 on the complaint of Tahir Iqbal, reportedly a militant in an organization, who stated that an unidentified man sent him a blasphemous text message on his mobile phone. The Muslim clerics have been putting pressure on the court to hand Haleem over to them so they could execute him. In another case, a petition has been moved against a Muslim Qurban Ali, the principal of Qurban and

Surrayya Educational Trust in Lahore Cant by a Muslim religious leader Muhammad Younas, Khateeb Masjid-e-Hira in Lahore before the Lahore High Court for allegedly committing blasphemy by publishing a book under the name of "Qurban Aagahi" containing 'objectionable material' and was part of the course in different classes in his school. The accuser said that Qurban Ali had committed the offence under section 295-C PPC and was liable to be punished in accordance with the law, which is death penalty.

Though blasphemy laws are still widely misused for personal reasons, two recent developments create some hope for change on the ground. In the first case, through the mediation of human rights workers, five Christians, Salamat Masih, 42, his son Rashid, 16, and their relatives Ishfaq, Saba and Dao Masih, who were charged with "blasphemy" against Islam during April 2007, were released on Jan. 19, 2009. This is the first happening of its kind. In the second incident, a group of Muslim lawyers of the area opposed a Muslim accuser's allegation and announced that they will defend Ahmadi allegedly accused blasphemers in the court for free. On Jan. 28, police arrested 4 minor Ahmadi boys, aged between 14 and 16, and a Ahmadi man Mubashar Ahmed (45), on Jan. 30, under Section 295-C of PPC. According to the FIR, the boys are accused of writing blasphemous material in latrines of Kot Sultan's Gulzar-e-Madina mosque. Ironically, no evidence had been provided prior to the five arrests. Surprisingly, the Muslim lawyers were ready to defend Ahmadis, which were declared non-Muslim by the State in 1973. Definitely, it is a very positive development which will put Muslim complainant in a defensive position.

Generally in blasphemy cases, police and the courts have been under pressure of the religious clerics. No lawyer been ready to defend the alleged blasphemers. Although previous governments of Benazir Bhutto and former President Pervez Musharraf's government tried to minimize the misuse of the laws through various amendments, however, until these moves did not successful. According to an amendment made by the parliament in 2004 in Section 295-C, PPC, the police are bound to thoroughly investigate blasphemy accusations before levelling criminal charges, but still the police has been registering cases without any proper investigation due to the pressure from religious clerics of the area.

There is no doubt that blasphemy laws are against the principles of basic human rights. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the parliament to abolish all discriminatory laws including blasphemy laws which have been creating a constant threat to the lives of Pakistani citizens and, especially, the lives of non-Muslims of the country.

'Blasphemy' Christians released In Pakistan but violence continues

by Jawad Mazhar

Compass Direct (26.01.2009) / HRWF (27.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Five Pakistani Christians who were detained and charged with "blasphemy" against Islam during April 2007 spend their first weekend in freedom Sunday, January 25, after they were freed from prison, but the news was overshadowed by reports of violence against believers, in which at two persons died died.

In remarks distributed by Compass Direct News agency, advocacy group Sharing Life Ministries Pakistan (SLMP) said it had negotiated their release with Muslim leaders.

It said a Punjab court released Salamat Masih, 42, his son Rashid, 16 and their relatives Ishfaq, Saba and Dao Masih through "reconciliation" and out-of-court meetings between Muslim and Christian representatives.

"This is a wonderful sign that has made history," added SLMP representative Shahzad Kamran, adding that the "case can set a precedent for future blasphemy cases against Christians."

Islamic clergymen

As a result of the meetings, Islamic clergymen reportedly agreed to issue a fatwa, or 'religious edict' declaring the accused men innocent of blasphemy. The Muslim witnesses withdrew their testimony on January 13, and District Judge Sheik Salahudin acquitted the five men in a Toba Tek Singh court, Compass Direct News reported.

The troubles began in April with an apparent quarrel between Rashid Masih's younger brother Daniel, 12, and a Muslim child named Sunny, SLMP said. During the argument, a sticker fell off Sunny's shirt that bore the words Yah Rasool Allah, a reference to Muhammad as God's messenger, reports said.

A local resident, identified as Mohammed Farsal, saw the sticker on the ground and accused the Christian children of blasphemy. Violence soon broke out, with an angry mob of some 2,000 Muslims attacking Christian Colony, a Christian neighborhood, stoning houses and "torturing" Christians SLMP said.

Christian Ratan Masih was among those injured while other Christians fled. Police eventually arrested all five men on charges of insulting Islam, although they eventually ended up in prison at different times.

Pakistan minister

News of the release came as Pakistan's Federal Minister for Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, said he wants Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws will be repealed as part of what he called his struggle for "religious freedom, human dignity and social justice."

In a statement obtained by BosNewsLife he said, "Religious minorities have been neglected, victimized and oppressed in Pakistan."

He said Christians still "faced constitutional and institutionalized discrimination and inequality." However he added, "our government is committed to address the long-standing issues of minorities. We are making all-out efforts to uplift and empower minorities."

Christian lawyers have issued an appeal to Bhatti and the government to urgently tackle the misuse of legislation to discriminate minorities, amid concerns over Islamic extremism and violence.

Couple attacked

In one of the latest violent incidents confirmed to BosNewsLife, two gunmen killed a Christian social worker and injured his spouse on offering resistance during a robbery at Medina Colony, a town of Sheikhpura, near Lahore in Punjab Province, January 12.

Officials told BosNewsLife that Stephen Masih and his wife Zainab Stephen were attacked while going to a market when the robbers intercepted them and tried to deprive them of cash, cell phones and other valuables.

The Christian couple resisted, apparently provoking the rage of the robbers, who sprayed bullets on them indiscriminately.

The shooting left her husband dead and Zainab Stephen critically injured, investigators said. While this seemed a robbery, investigators and rights groups have reported similar incidents in which religion appeared the main reasons for the attack.

Dancer Killed

A week earlier, suspected Muslim militants shot and killed a female dancer in Pakistan's troubled Swat Valley for allegedly refusing to heed the radical Taliban group's warning to abandon her profession.

Christian and all female education institutions in the area have also been forced to close, BosNewsLife learned. There have been also several suspicious traffic accidents involving Christians in the country, in which several believers were injured, police officials have suggested.

Islamic groups have rejected the spread of Christianity in the mainly Muslim nation, and militants have accused Christians of supporting the U.S.-led war on terrorism, advocacy groups have said.

Young Pakistani sisters abducted, forced to convert to Islam

Repeatedly raped, minor and 18-year-old now face societal rejection

By Roger Elliott

Compass Direct (19.01.2009) / HRWF (20.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The ordeal of two teenage Christian sisters in Pakistan is over after Muslims allegedly abducted and raped them and forced them to convert to Islam, but they fear a future of societal rejection.

Parvisha Masih, 18, and Sanam Masih, 14, said three Muslim men kidnapped them last November, raping them several times during two weeks of captivity.

"We are happy to return to the family, but we are feeling ashamed because there is no respect for us in society now," Parvisha Masih said. "We don't want to go back to school and have to face our friends."

They face a long legal battle that will inevitably bring them into contact with their captors - who have already assaulted their family in court.

"We feel very afraid, and we are still receiving threats," Parvisha Masih told Compass. "We are worried about our family and about ourselves. I don't ever want to see those men again."

On Jan. 2 the sisters recorded statements concerning their alleged abduction, rape and forced conversion to Islam before a local magistrate in Gujranwala. Earlier, they gave statements in Karachi, where they had been taken by their captors some 840 miles to the south. Two First Incident Reports (FIRs) have been filed.

In Gujranwala, Muhammad Irfan, Muhammed Mehboob and Muhammed Rafique, Mehboob's brother-in-law, are charged with kidnapping.

Kidnapped

Irfan and Mehboob, suspected of involvement in a human trafficking ring, at first made contact with Parvisha Masih accidentally.

"Parvisha received a wrong number call and talked to Muhammad Irfan," said Katherine Karamat, an investigative officer for the Center for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS). "Some days later, Irfan called again and told her that he had a beauty salon, and if she wanted training he could arrange that for her."

Eager to earn extra money for the family, Masih convinced her younger sister Sanam to join her in accepting the offer, according to CLAAS.

Irfan arranged to drive them to their first day of work in his car. At 10 a.m. on Nov. 12, Irfan and Mehboob picked the sisters up from their home.

"This is a common practice now," said Michael Javaid, a Pakistani member of parliament based in Karachi. "They offer poor people from the villages a good job, and the parents are poor so they trust them, but then they bring these girls and sell them to other people."

According to the sisters' testimony, Irfan stopped the car after roughly half an hour to buy beverages. He offered them both a bottle of fruit juice that they drank, unaware that he had drugged it.

En route to Karachi, Irfan and Mehboob then drove the sisters to a motel in Mianwali, threatening them at gunpoint and telling them they would be killed if they tried to escape. The sisters reported that the men then raped them.

In the morning they were ushered back into the car and driven to the coastal city of Karachi, where they were held captive at Rafique's house. Over the next five days, they said, the men raped them repeatedly.

Masih and Sanam then were taken to a madrassa (Islamic school), where a mufti issued certificates stating that the two had become Muslims. Parvisha Masih was renamed Sana, and her sister received the name Tayyaba.

Javaid and lawyers from CLAAS challenged these certificates, asserting that the sisters did not sign them.

"Anyone can get these papers by giving some kind of a bribe; [clerics] feel it is a service to Islam," said Javaid. "They will issue a certificate without knowing the will of the person, whether this is a forcible conversion or not."

Following their forced conversion at the madrassa, the Muslims took the sisters to the office of lawyers Nayer Zia-UI-Din and Kokab Sahab-UI-Din. Irfan explained to the lawyers that the sisters had converted to Islam and did not wish to return home to their Christian family, but instead wanted to stay at the government-run Dar-UI-Aman shelter for women. Before leaving, Irfan told Masih and Sanam that they would be freed after the lawyers brought them to court the following day.

The lawyers told the sisters to sign blank sheets of paper, forging testimony from the pair that they planned to use to support their case, according to CLAAS. The attorneys told the sisters that they could stay with their family that night and took Masih and Sanam to their home, but no other family members were present.

After the sisters had fallen asleep, according to CLAAS, Sahab-UI-Din took Parvisha Masih into a separate room and sexually abused her. Police found medication in Sahab-UI-Din's

apartment indicating that the sisters were again drugged. Sanam said she woke up when she heard her older sister crying for help.

"I took the mobile of the lawyer and called 15 [the emergency police number in Pakistan]," she told Compass. "One lawyer had left; the other was with Parvisha." She was able to escape the house and describe her location to authorities.

Police arrived at the scene shortly afterward, immediately referring Parvisha Masih to a hospital and arresting Sahab-UI-Din, whom they took to the Ferozabad police station. The other lawyer, Zia-UI-Din, had left but was later arrested at his home.

At the police station, Sanam called her father, Arif Masih, who rushed to Karachi to bring his daughters back home.

Assaulted in court

The following day (Nov. 22), the sisters appeared before a magistrate to give testimony, accompanied by their father and other relatives. Defendants Zia-UI-Din and Sahab-UI-Din, both charged with rape, were also present. Upon learning that the sisters' father was in the room, they located him and began to attack him.

"The magistrate was in his chambers, and so the lawyers attacked the father and relatives, beating them, even the women, there in the courtroom, which never happened before!" said Javaid. "All the police were called, the FHO [court police], the superintendant and deputy superintendant, and they took them to the lock-up for safety."

Javaid said he plans to take a strong contingent of associates when they next appear in court to protect the sisters and deter another attack.

This is the second known case of its kind in recent months. Saba and Aneela Masih underwent a similar ordeal last July, and although 10-year-old Aneela has been returned to her family, her 13-year-old sister, forced to marry one of the men who kidnapped her, remains with her captors.

Christian girls from poor families make easy targets, and many cases go undocumented, Javaid told Compass. High legal fees often make it impossible for poor families to bring a case to court. Corrupt lawyers, easily swayed by bribes, often create further expense.

On top of this, a biased legal system that favors Muslims over Christians is particularly reluctant to pass judgments that would undermine conversion to Islam.

"Because both [Parvisha and Sanam Masih] are Christian and the accused were Muslim, to save their skin they made [the sisters] embrace Islam forcefully so they can marry them maybe or whatever they want," said CLAAS lawyer Samson Joseph.

Christian girls drugged and sold as sex slaves

Muslim neighbor had promised them training in 'Cosmetology'

Int'l Christian Concern (13.01.2009) / HRWF (14.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - ICC (International Christian Concern) (January 13, 2009) The Washington-DC based human rights group, International Christian Concern (ICC) www.persecution.org has learned that two Christian girls in Pakistan have finally been rescued after two Muslim men kidnapped them two months

ago, raped them repeatedly, forcibly converted them to Islam, and sold them to other men as sex slaves.

Sisters Parvisha, 18, and Sanam, 14, received a call in November 2008 from their neighbor, Muhammad Irfan, offering them training in cosmetology and jobs in his beauty salon. Parvisha, the oldest of seven children, convinced her father, Pastor Sharif Alam, to allow her to take the opportunity so that she could help support their struggling family. Irfan told the girls that he would come to pick them up since they did not know where his shop was.

Kidnappers drug, rape, and force sisters to accept Islam

On November 12, 2008, Irfan picked the girls up with the help of another man, Muhammed Mehboob, drove them 30 minutes away from home and stopped to get drinks. The girls' drinks were heavily drugged and when the sisters came to they found themselves locked in a small hotel room almost 500 miles away from their home in Gujranwala. At gunpoint, the girls were told that if they tried to escape or made any noise they and all of their family would be killed. During the night, each man raped both girls.

The next day the men drove the sisters to Karachi where they stayed at Mehboob's brother-in-law's house. There they repeatedly raped both girls over several days and then took them to an Islamic religious school where they forced them to convert to Islam. Parvisha and Sanam were given Muslim names and told that if they cooperated they would be released soon.

Irfan and Mehboob then took the sisters to a local law office. They met with two lawyers, Nayer Zia-UI-Din and Kokab Sahab-UI-Din, and told them that both girls had embraced Islam and wished to stay in a government run shelter home for women. The lawyers asked the girls to sign a blank sheet. Irfan told the girls that the lawyers would present them in the court tomorrow and then they would be free to go. Irfan and Mehboob then left, leaving the girls with the two lawyers.

Lawyers rape Parvisha after promising a safe place to stay

The lawyers told Parvisha and Sanam that since they had no place to spend the night, they could come with them and stay with their family. They took the girls to their apartment but there were no other family members present, and when the girls asked about it, they were told that everyone was attending a family function and would be back before midnight. They gave them a room to sleep.

The lawyers waited until both girls fell asleep and then dragged Parvisha into another room where they raped her. Sanam woke up when she heard someone crying and yelling for help. She ran out of the room and saw both lawyers inserting electrical equipment into Parvisha's private parts.

While Sanam was looking for a weapon she could use to defend her sister, she saw a cell phone lying on the table, grabbed the phone and dialed the emergency mobile police number. Within no time the police arrived and arrested Kokab Sahab-UI-Din. An FIR was registered against him. Parvisha was immediately taken to the hospital. Sanam called her father from the police station, informing him of the situation. Pastor Sharif Alam rushed to Karachi to bring his daughters back home.

Muslim mob defends rapists, attacks girls' father

Pastor Alam then contacted a Christian legal group called CLAAS for help. On December 31, the CLAAS team visited Pastor Alam and his family to ascertain what had happened.

While they were still talking to the victims and their family a large crowd of about 35 people gathered outside the house. They chanted for the pastor to hand the newly "converted" girls over to the custody of local Muslim authorities.

The crowd quickly became hostile and started throwing bricks and stones at Pastor Alam's house. When Pastor Alam and a representative of CLAAS went out to talk to the crowd, someone shot at them but hit a bystander.

Immediately, Pastor Alam called the local police, but not before the mob had seized Pastor Alam's son Sheraz and severely beat him. The police arrived as the angry mob was trying to break into Pastor Alam's house and dispersed the crowd, arresting three people responsible for the attack.

Since then, Pastor Alam has reported that his son in-law, Stian Akram Khokhar, has been missing. He believes that the Irfan and Mehboob are responsible and are threatening him to back off the case.

On January 2 both girls gave official statements to the local Magistrate. They stated that they were abducted from their home, raped and then forcibly converted to Islam, and that they want to live and die as Christians and at no cost will leave their family.

Please pray for Parvisha and Sanam and their family. Pray that God would strengthen their faith and heal their wounds. Pray that those responsible for these heinous crimes would be caught and punished appropriately.

Christians in Pakistan are often targeted not only for their faith but because they live in poverty and have little means to defend themselves. Please call the Pakistani embassy in your country and ask them to work harder to protect the rights of religious minorities.
