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Pakistan: Sunni militants killing Shias – Analysis

Eurasia (08.09.2012) - Human Rights Watch has expressed concern about increasing violence against the minority Shia Muslim community in Pakistan and asked the government in Islamabad to protect it from sectarian attacks by Sunni militant groups.

"Deadly attacks on Shia communities across Pakistan are escalating," HRW's Asia director Brad Adams said. "The government's persistent failure to apprehend attackers or prosecute the extremist groups organizing the attacks suggests that it is indifferent to this carnage," he added.

"While sectarian violence is a longstanding problem in Pakistan, attacks against ordinary Shia have increased dramatically in recent years," said HRW, one of the world's leading independent organizations dedicated to defending and protecting human rights.

In 2012, at least 320 members of the Shia population have been killed in targeted attacks. Over 100 have been killed in Balochistan province, the majority from the Hazara community. Against this backdrop, the New York-based HRW said: "The government should hold accountable those responsible for ordering and participating in deadly attacks targeting Shia."

The fact is that while authorities claim to have arrested dozens of suspects in attacks against Shia since 2008, only a handful have been charged, and no one has been held accountable for these attacks.

Human Rights Watch welcomed the August 31 arrest of Malik Ishaq, the leader of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, in Lahore in a case filed against him for inciting violence against the Shia community on August 9 and described it as "an important development, coming after repeated failed attempts to bring him to justice".

Despite being the accused in some 44 cases, involving the killing of some 70 people, mostly from the Shia community, Ishaq has previously been acquitted by Pakistani courts in 34 cases and granted bail in the other 10.

The government recently detained him under provisions of the Maintenance of Public Order Act as it deemed him to be a threat to public security. A review board of the Lahore High Court ordered his release in January 2012 on the grounds that Ishaq's continued detention was unjustified because he had been granted bail in all cases pending against him.

"The arrest of Malik Ishaq, who has been implicated in dozens of killings, is an important test for Pakistan's criminal justice system," Adams said. "Sectarian violence won't end until those responsible are brought to trial and justice."

Indiscriminate killings

According to HRW, in the most recent violence, in two separate attacks on September 1, 2012, gunmen attacked and killed eight Hazara Shia in Quetta, Balochistan's capital. In the first attack, witnesses told Human Rights Watch that four armed men riding on two motorbikes shot dead five Hazaras at a bus stop in the Hazar Ganji area of the city.

The victims, all vegetable sellers, were returning from the vegetable market. Within two hours of the attack, gunmen riding a motorbike attacked a nearby bus stop, killing two people from the Hazara community. An eighth victim, also a Hazara Shia, died in the hospital on September 2.

On August 30, gunmen riding a motorbike shot dead Zulfiqar Naqvi, a Shia judge, his driver, Essa Khan, and a police bodyguard, Abdul Shakoor, as Naqvi headed to work in Quetta.

On August 16, 2012 four buses passing through the Babusar Top area of Mansehra district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (formerly the North-West Frontier Province) were ambushed by gunmen who made all the passengers disembark. The attackers checked the national identity cards of each passenger and summarily executed 22 passengers identified as belonging to the Shia community. A spokesman for the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, the Pakistani Taliban, claimed responsibility for the killings.

"Similar attacks targeting the Shia population have taken place repeatedly over the last year in Balochistan, the port city of Karachi, predominantly Shia populated areas of Gilgit Baltistan in the northern areas, and in Pakistan's tribal areas," Human Rights Watch said.

HRW said: "Sunni militant groups such as the ostensibly banned Lashkar-e Jhangvi have operated with widespread impunity across Pakistan while law enforcement officials have effectively turned a blind eye on attacks against Shia communities. Some Sunni extremist groups are known to be allies of the Pakistani military, its intelligence agencies, and affiliated paramilitaries, such as the Frontier Corps."

Human Rights Watch urged Pakistan's federal government and relevant provincial governments to make all possible efforts to promptly apprehend and prosecute those responsible for recent attacks and other crimes targeting the Shia population.

The organisation called upon the government to direct civilian agencies and the military responsible for security to actively protect those facing attack from extremist groups, and to address the growing perception, particularly in Balochistan and Pakistan's tribal areas, that state authorities look the other way when Shia are attacked.

In particular, HRW said, the Pakistani government should increase the number of security personnel in Shia majority areas and enclaves at high risk of attack, particularly the Hazara community in Quetta. The government should also actively investigate allegations

of collusion between Sunni militant groups and military intelligence and paramilitary forces and hold accountable personnel found to be involved in criminal acts.

"Pakistan's government cannot play the role of unconcerned bystander as the Shia across Pakistan are slaughtered," Adams said. "Pakistan's political leaders, law enforcement agencies, judiciary, and military need to take this as seriously as they take other security threats to the state."

Minority rights day - year 2012 proved to be a nightmare for the religious minorities

Asian Human Rights Commission (18.12.2012) - The law enforcement agencies, the local court system and above all the government institutions are failing to protect the lives and properties of religious minorities all around the country.

As in previous years, 2012 proved a nightmare for the religious minorities in Pakistan. People from the Hindu, Dalit, Christian and Ahmadi communities and even the Shiite community, which is the second largest Islamic community, were persecuted by several state and non-state actors. During the entire year men, women and children of religious minorities were targeted with a designed agenda to force people to quit the country.

More than 200 persons from the Shiite community were killed in bomb blasts, target killings and attacks. Twelve men from the Ahmadi community were killed under blasphemy charges in the province of Punjab. Over 19 girls of Hindu minority and especially of Dalit community were kidnapped and forcibly converted to Islam. Several Christians were also targeted, tortured and killed by arranged mobs and the local police. The Muslims and Christians were arrested and booked on the charges of blasphemy.

The Constitution of Pakistan was altered to persecute religious groups in the country and later on the term 'minority' was deliberately introduced to disfranchise Christian, Sikh, Hindu, Bahai and other groups from the mainstream, though they were equally law-abiding and taxpaying citizens of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

The Muslim fundamentalists, their militant organisations, the military governments and right wing political parties of Pakistan have been trying to replicate the Islamic model of Saudi Arabia which has generated an atmosphere of intolerance and violence by punishing ordinary people in the name of Islam. The gross misuse of blasphemy laws is one of the reasons society is turning into a killing field. Virtual anarchy rules in the country and total chaos is not far behind.

In the post-9/11 world, the debate on the clash of civilisations and war against terror has further destroyed the progressive and secular spirit of the majority people of the state as our security establishment has superseded the democratic and elected governments and has taken over the major decisions of the state.

The Ahmadis, a sect that believes in Islam and claims to be ardent followers, has been declared as non-Muslim under the Pakistani legislation. Evidently, the government of Pakistan has not only confiscated their freedom to faith, belief and practice, but also proactively victimised them socially, economically and educationally. The Ahmadis are one such group which is denied their right to vote; they cannot register as a voter in Pakistan. It is a most shameful and horrifying fact that all Muslims in Pakistan in order to get their I.D cards which are essential for registering as a voter, have to make a mandatory declaration pronouncing the Founder of the Ahmadiyya

Community as an imposter and a liar. No civil society in the modern times can tolerate such arrogance of a country towards its own nationals.

Hindus under attack

On November 8, a group of Islamic extremists arrived at a Hindu temple on the outskirts of one of the country's largest cities, Karachi, shouting, "Kill the Hindus, kill the children of the Hindus." The group, which was armed with pistols, destroyed the temple fittings and ripped off the golden bangles worn by the women. The men and women were beaten indiscriminately and the attackers were so sure of their impunity from any action from the authorities they did not even bother to conceal their identities or cover their faces.

This was not an isolated case; indeed, it was the second time this particular temple has been attacked, and there have been many such incidents reported. Even Muslims who speak out in public in defence and support Hindus leave themselves open to attack.

Another area of concern which involves members of the Hindu and Christian minorities is that of forced marriage and conversion. Typically a Hindu girl goes missing and when she next contacts her family they find that she has been married to a Muslim boy. There have been numerous court hearings in several cases to determine whether the conversion was voluntary and in each case students from nearby madrassas attend court to intimidate the judges by chanting demands that the conversion be confirmed. An NGO worker said that in the 100 cases that he had personally worked on only one girl had been safely returned to her family.

For 2012 the theme for International Women's Day was 'Connecting girls, inspiring futures' and the entire world was promising to follow the theme. But on the other hand, unfortunately, girls and women of religious minorities in Pakistan, especially Hindu girls in Sindh, feel disconnected from the main-stream, humiliated with no hope. In the last couple of days in Sindh, four Hindu girls (Lata Kumari from Karachi, Rinkal Kumari from Mirpur Mathelo, Aamna Kohli from Tando Bago, were kidnapped and converted to Islam, allegedly at gunpoint.

Such crime has stopped the Hindu community from even celebrating their sacred festivals. In the last couple of weeks, more than a dozen minor children, traders, shopkeepers and businessmen of the Hindu community were reportedly kidnapped for ransom and several families have migrated due to insecure and unsafe future of their families and businesses.

According to the Daily Express Tribune the part of a disturbing trend in violence against minorities in the country, at least 27 places of worship of religious minorities have been vandalised in the last four years, according to data collected by the Church-run National Commission of Justice and Peace. The NCJP also recorded incidents of forcefully occupying land meant for worship places or occupying existing places, as well as murders of those involved in building worship places.

This year, three churches in Sindh, one in [Mardan](#) and one in Faisalabad were attacked; one Hindu temple was vandalised, one razed in Karachi and another attacked in Peshawar, while [minarets of an Ahmadi place of worship were demolished in Kharian](#), Punjab. The perpetrators in all of these cases were 'unidentified men,' except for the Ahmadi worship place, where the minarets were demolished by the Punjab police.

On the issue of blasphemy laws; with the case of Rimsha Masih still grabbing the headlines, another case of blasphemy was reported to police on Wednesday, October 10th, 2012, this time not in a slum but in a middle-class neighbourhood of Gulshan-i-Iqbal, after the house of the accused boy belonging to a religious minority community

was ransacked and furniture was set on fire in a violent protest. The teenage Christian boy has been accused of sending text messages containing 'blasphemous' content to his area residents without reading it. The incident took place in the staff colony of the Sui Southern Gas Company (SSGC) located at the junction of University Road and Abul Hasan Ispahani Road.

School set on fire in Lahore

An angry mob set a school on fire in Lahore, alleging that the school gave a test that insulted Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). A Pakistani teacher at the centre of a blasphemy row was in hiding as her school management denied all responsibility for the 'dirty act' and called for her to be punished.

A large number of students, their parents and other people on Wednesday protested against a school administration for distributing a blasphemous essay sheet among students. The protesters later set the Farooqi Girls High School in Ravi Road area on fire. People in the area have been demanding police action against the teacher accused of blasphemy for the last couple of days.

On the same day a student organisation and residents of the area demonstrated against the school administration. They later broke the school gate and set its building and principal's car on fire. Police reached the site and resorted to aerial firing to disperse the mob. A citizen was injured during the protest and was admitted to hospital.

Police also arrested school Principal Asim Farooqi and registered a case against teacher Irfa Iftikhar under section 295/C on the complaint of Qari Abdullah Saqib. Principal Asim Farooqi said that he has already dismissed Irfa Iftikhar and that he too regrets the 'mistake'.

The extremists and the right-wing media, particularly some TV channels of the country, are portraying other religions as exotic and obscurantist. On the other hand, the same right-wing media of the West is calling Islam a backward and extremist form of faith. There is a need to promote interfaith dialogue to reduce the rapidly growing hatred and abhorrence.

Pakistan is known in the international community and declared in the country's Constitution as an Islamic nation where Islam is glorified as the superb religion and its followers are pious Muslims. There is no doubt that Islam teaches tolerance, love, respect for other religions, and that life and death are in the hands of Allah. The killing of any human being is forbidden and in the Quran it is the highest form of sin.

But how Islam is defined in practice is yet a big question in Pakistani society. In the absence of any clear definition about the implementation of Islam a strong perception has been widely spread that it can be implemented only through the violence and exemplary punishment to those who do not properly follow its precepts. Saudi Arabia, being the role model of Shariah and a real Islamic country, demonstrates its commitment every Friday by handing down death sentences that are then carried out by beheading. At the same time thieves have their hands removed.

The absence of the rule of law and a weak criminal justice system allows the increasing religious intolerance where the religious groups, with the help of the mushrooming growth of seminaries (Madressas) and mosques are enforcing their own tailored Islamic laws by killing, attacking, forcibly converting non-Muslims to Islam and implicating any person who stands in their way in blasphemy cases.

Muslim activist: changes to the blasphemy and religious freedom, to reform Pakistan

AsiaNews - Amendments to the law on blasphemy, religious freedom - as a practice and proclamation of the faith - and the protection of women workers, including those who perform household chores, because they too are part of the productive "strength" in the development of the country. This is what the Muslim feminist Bushra Khaliq tells AsiaNews. She is committed, like many other civil society representatives and Muslim-Christian politicians and intellectuals to promote equal rights and opportunities in Pakistan. In conjunction with the International Day for Human Rights, across the nation meetings, conferences and events were held to raise awareness among citizens and the ruling class on the importance of real equality between men and women, between the Muslim majority and ethno-religious minorities.

A "reform of the system is needed" said activist Bushra Khaliq Muslim, giving "full freedom" to each individual to "profess, practice and propagate" their faith. She adds that this should be combined with respect for the rights of women workers even in "more informal" areas like the "home, housewives and farmers" because they are an integral part "of the workforce." With a courageous and determined stance, the Muslim activist also hopes for a "modification" to the blasphemy laws, the source of "ethno-religious hatred and intolerance." The "black law" she makes clear, is a source of abuse and pretext to attack opponents and rivals, as well as to "settle personal disputes." Together with the practice of physical and mental torture, says the woman, it must be confronted and changed

Among other underlying causes of violence and marginalization, there are also the "patriarchal system" and the values associated with a conservatism that relegates women to a subordinate position relative to men. From here, domestic violence, kidnapping, marriages and forced conversions, especially on women belonging to ethnic and religious minorities. Muslim parliamentarian Anjum Safdar assures that "the government is committed to addressing and resolving these challenges" and meet the needs "of marginalized groups."

However, much remains to be done for a real and effective equality between Muslims and non-Muslims in Pakistan, according to the ideal of the founding father of the nation Ali Jinnah. The Christian women's rights activist Nazia Sardar calls for greater women's representation, with an increase in "quotas" in Parliament and in the provincial assemblies from 17 to 33%. To this is added the request made by Suneel Malik, director of the Christian PHD Foundation, which is calling on the Islamabad executive to create a rule against forced conversion to Islam.

To raise public awareness demonstrations in favor of human rights and religious freedom were held throughout the country. Among these, the march on 9 December titled "Make your voice heard", which was launched by the Faisalabad Press Club (Punjab) and ended in the city center. Christians and Muslims together, called for a law against domestic violence and forced conversions, to prevent "new cases of human rights violations."

The mob mentality that prevents things improving for Pakistan's minorities

While politicians shy away from watering down official discrimination, the situation isn't going to improve.

NEW STATESMAN (04.12.2012) - By any standards, the last few days have been bleak for Pakistan's persecuted minority communities.

It started on Saturday, when a century-old Hindu temple in Karachi's busy Soldier Bazaar area was demolished with the help of police. The Shri Rama Pir Mandir (temple) was razed to the ground along with three or four houses, by a private builder acting with the assistance of the local administration. This was despite the fact that a court stay order protecting the site had been granted. The bulldozers arrived in the morning, and people were told to get out of their houses. They watched as their homes and possessions were destroyed, unable to do anything about it. In this poverty-ridden cantonment, people live in cramped conditions. Around four families lived in each house that was destroyed, meaning that some 40 people have been made homeless.

Perhaps even more distressing for residents was the wanton destruction of their place of worship. The scene was devastating. Hindu deities sat among the rubble; families wept and screamed "if you don't want us, we'll go to India". Astonishingly, despite the physical evidence, the authorities have continued to claim that the temple was not destroyed and that they were only acting against illegal occupants. This blatant dishonesty demonstrates the impunity with which the authorities can operate, confident that the disenfranchised Hindu community will be unable to do much about it.

The next incident took place in Lahore in the early hours of Monday morning. A group of 12-15 masked men entered an Ahmadi graveyard in the Model Town area, bearing weapons and excavation tools. They tied up the guards at the compound and desecrated 100 graves, removing and breaking tombstones, saying that they should not bear religious inscriptions because Ahmadis are "infidels". The Ahmadiyya community is regarded as heretical because it does not believe that Mohammed was the last prophet to be sent to earth. To become a citizen of Pakistan, one must sign an oath declaring Ahmadis to be non-Muslims. Although the men who desecrated the graves are thought to have been members of the Taliban or another militant group, it is easy to see how the backdrop of officially-entrenched discrimination allows such views to flourish.

In an unrelated episode later that day, it emerged that Nadeem Yousuf, a 22-year-old man accused of blasphemy, had died in police custody. He had been detained seven days previously in Nankana Sahib town, Punjab, suspected of burning the Quran. According to his family, he suffered from mental health problems. The circumstances of his death are murky. Police claim he became seriously ill in custody, implying that he was a drug addict and could have died from withdrawal. His family allege that he was tortured to death. Regardless of the exact truth - and answers will be hard to come by - his case is just another sad example of blasphemy accusations being a death sentence. Even before the sentence is handed down, the majority of the accused die in custody or at the hands of an angry mob.

Taken together, these ostensibly unrelated incidents provide a disturbing snapshot of the fault line running through Pakistani society. From the extremists who desecrated the graveyard, to the local authority who demolished the Hindu temple, to the police who at worst tortured a young man and at best failed to get him medical assistance, there is a troubling disregard for safeguarding minority rights and freedom of religion. The solutions? They can only be long-term: education, community cohesion work, proper legal protection for minorities rather than just empty condemnations. Politicians shy away from watering down official discrimination such as the blasphemy law and the Ahmadi clause due to widespread support for these measures. But unless this mob mentality is tackled head on, there is very little hope for fighting extremist elements. After all, on the face of it, what is there really to separate the two?

Desecration of Ahmadi graves

IRPP (03.12.2012) - According to recent reports, over one hundred Ahmadiyya gravestones were vandalized early this morning in Lahore, located in Pakistan's Punjab province.

In a press release issued by Sadr Anjuman Ahmadiyya, 12 to 15 people, several who brandished weapons, beat the cemetery's night watchman before desecrating 120 graves at approximately 3:00 AM on Monday, 3 December. Twenty guests and family members of the cemetery caretaker and security guard were locked up during the attack.

It has been reported by witnesses that the attackers said they were members of "a banned organization and the Taliban". As of Monday afternoon, no action has been taken by Pakistani police to bring those behind the violence to justice.

Ahmadi Muslims represent approximately 0.2 percent of Pakistan's population, but they are not recognized as "Muslims" by Pakistani law. In 2010, Anti-Ahmadi militants carried out coordinated attacks on Ahmadi mosques, killing 93 people and injuring many more. The number of attacks on Ahmadis continues to steadily rise, and Ahmadis live in constant fear of being violated for their beliefs.

THE INSTITUTE on Religion and Public Policy condemns the continued persecution of Ahmadis and calls upon the government of Pakistan to take immediate action to bring the individuals behind the recent attacks to justice.

Journalist targeted for 'threatening' Islam

Deutsche Welle (27.11.2012) - Religious extremists continue to intimidate journalists in Pakistan. The Taliban has claimed responsibility for recently planting a bomb under the car of a prominent journalist because he was "working against Islam."

Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir, who hosts a popular political talk show Capital Talk on Geo - Pakistan's biggest private TV channel - and writes a column for Jang newspaper, narrowly escaped an attempt on his life on Monday when a bomb was found attached to the underside of his car.

Police said that half a kilogram of explosives had been fitted with a detonator under Mir's car in capital Islamabad.

Pakistan is one of the most perilous countries for journalists in the world. A 2012 UNESCO report has ranked Pakistan "the second most dangerous country for journalists the world over" after Mexico. According to the South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA), 17 journalists were killed in South Asia in 2011, 12 of them in Pakistan.

Terrorism and Islamism are the most dangerous issues for Pakistani journalists to report on, SAFMA says.

Criticism of the Taliban

Mir had voiced criticism of the Taliban shooting of Malala Yousufzai - a teenage activist who spoke out against the militants in their northwestern stronghold Swat and campaigned for girls' education.

"Life and death is in the hands of Allah. Allah saved his life but we will make a similar attempt again," Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan told AFP. "Hamid Mir earlier shot into prominence for working in the interest of Islam and Muslims. We targeted him because now he is working against Islam and Muslims," he said.

Of late, Mir has been critical of the Pakistani military and the country's security agencies, particularly of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. Generally, Mir is considered a conservative journalist in Pakistan.

State or non-state elements?

Mir told DW in an interview that he would not like to point fingers at any group until the authorities finished their investigation of the case.

"Last month, when I conducted shows about Yousufzai, I started receiving death threats," Mir said. "I came to know that the interior ministry had sent letters to provincial governments informing them that the Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud had sent assassins after me." But he said he was not sure whether it was state or the non-state elements that wanted to see him dead.

Matiullah Jan, a Pakistan journalist and political analysts, criticized security agencies for failing to protect journalists. "You can blame the militants if a journalist is being attacked in northwestern tribal areas, but if something is happening in the heart of the capital then you get suspicious about government's agencies," Jan told DW.

Many Pakistani analysts believe that the agencies are playing a dubious role in fighting Islamist extremists in the country. They claim that some militant groups are being backed by the ISI.

Imtiaz Alam, Secretary General of SAFMA, told DW that both state and non-state elements were against press freedom in Pakistan.

"So many journalists in Pakistan have been killed yet nobody has ever been brought to justice for these murders. The recommendations of the judicial commission investigating Saleem Shahzad's murder (allegedly killed by the ISI) have never been implemented," said Alam.

According to journalist Nasir Tufail in Karachi, the most perilous issues for Pakistani journalists to report on are ones regarding terrorism and Islamism. He said the journalists working on those issues had to be very cautious.

Criminalization of politics

Ghazi Salahuddin, a senior journalist at the Jang newspaper, told DW that Pakistani journalists had to work under very difficult circumstances.

"Many journalists feel scared and threatened. Pakistani politics has been criminalized. It has become very difficult for journalists to perform their tasks freely," he said, adding that journalists' unions should ensure that the rights and lives of people working in the media were protected.

Several journalists' and rights organizations have announced they will stage protests on Wednesday against the attempt on Mir's life.

Pakistan Rimsha blasphemy case dropped

A court in Pakistan has dropped a controversial blasphemy case against a Christian girl accused by her neighbour of burning pages from the Koran.

BBC News (19.11.2012) - The 14-year-old girl, known as Rimsha, was held in a maximum security jail in August, prompting global concern.

Her arrest followed accusations by a Muslim cleric who is now facing allegations that he planted evidence.

Rimsha's lawyer said the case had been a misuse of law. Her family received death threats and went into hiding.

There are fears that even though the case has been dropped, Rimsha and her family will not be safe in Pakistan.

Outcry

Rimsha, who doctors said had a younger mental age than her 14 years, was arrested in August in a Christian area of the capital, Islamabad, after a furious crowd demanded she be punished.

Following an outcry over the case, she was released on bail in September - an extremely rare move in blasphemy cases.

At Tuesday's hearing, all charges against her were thrown out by the Islamabad High Court for lack of evidence, lawyers said.

The judges had concluded the charges were based on "incriminated material that was planted in the girl's possession", said Abdul Hameed for the defence, the Associated Press reports.

Prosecutors have the right to appeal in the Supreme Court.

The case against the Muslim cleric accused of framing her will proceed, say local police. He will be tried for making a false accusation.

There has been no word yet from Rimsha and her family, who remain in hiding, at an undisclosed location, the BBC's Orla Guerin in Islamabad says.

Human rights campaigner Xavier P William welcomed the decision to drop the case against her, but pointed out that she and her family had been "forced to live in hiding fearing for their lives".

"In Pakistan, even being accused of blasphemy is equivalent to being sentenced," he told the BBC. "This is the irony that justice comes only under international pressure. The lower courts have completely surrendered to extremists' pressure because of the state's inability to protect them."

'She's guilty'

In Rimsha's neighbourhood, her Muslim neighbours were reluctant to speak on camera about her case. One man leaving afternoon prayers said the judgement was wrong. Others said they would accept the verdict.

Another Muslim man said: "We saw what happened. We know she's guilty but the court has let her off."

Members of the local Christian community told our correspondent the area was still tense and they were fearful. One man said that anyone speaking out in Rimsha's favour would get threats from Muslim neighbours. Another said they were still unable to hold mass in their local church.

Blasphemy is a highly sensitive issue in Pakistan, where 97% of the population are Muslim.

Christian campaigners say more than 30 people - suspected of blasphemy - have been killed by mobs or vigilantes over the past 20 years.

Critics say the controversial laws are misused all too often, to persecute minorities or settle scores.

Last year two leading politicians were assassinated after speaking out against the legislation.

Violation of human rights in Pakistan

EU Parliament question tabled by Esther Herranz García (PPE) and Teresa Jiménez-Becerril Barrio (PPE) for written answer

EU Parliament (06.10.2012)

Subject: VP/HR – Violation of human rights in Pakistan

Question

Last week, a 14 year-old Christian girl with Down's syndrome was unjustly arrested on a false accusation of blasphemy after a man reported her for having burned some pages of the Koran. The girl faces a possible death sentence. A few days later, also in Pakistan, a 10 year-old Christian girl was lured, raped and left unconscious by a Muslim man.

According to Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, at least 943 women and girls were killed in 2011 for breaking codes of female conduct laid down by local tribal law.

1. Has the Vice-President/High Representative made a statement on this outrageous situation?
2. Does the Vice-President/High Representative intend to condemn and these actions and apply penalties? If so, in what way?
3. What action does the Vice-President/High Representative intend to take if human rights and those of women and, in this case, children, continue to be abused in Pakistan?

Answer

Answer given by High Representative/Vice President Ashton (18.10.2012)

The European Union has regularly condemned human rights abuses in Pakistan, including violence against women and children, and encouraged the Government of Pakistan to take urgent measures to ensure protection for the rights of both groups. In my meeting with Foreign Minister Khar in Islamabad, June 2012, I specifically referred to the need to make progress on women's rights.

The EU is also well aware of the vulnerable situation of persons belonging to religious minorities in Pakistan. This concerns not only Christians, but also Shias, Ahmadis, Hindus and others. Poverty and lack of education are a part of the problem.

Pakistan introduced legislation in 2011 and 2012 to better tackle issues of discrimination and violence against women. The EU has repeatedly urged full implementation of these laws. After all, Pakistan is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in 2011 ratified the optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography.

The EU consistently raises issues of women and children's rights in the regular human rights dialogue with Pakistan and in all high-level and senior officials' meetings. The EU Delegation and EU ambassadors in Islamabad raise specific cases with the Pakistani authorities in bilateral contacts. Dialogue will be intensified under the recently agreed EU Engagement Plan with Pakistan, which lays emphasis on more intense dialogue on human rights.

Under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), support is provided for activities relating to the rights of women and children, with a particular focus on the issue of combating all forms of violence including rape.

PAKISTAN: Timeline of religious intolerance events in 2012

By Jordan McMurtrey for Human Rights Without Frontiers

19 February

Saif Masih, a Christian, quarreled with a young Muslim over a pigeon that led to about a half dozen boys from each group charging into a fistfight and later pelting each other with stones. With the Muslims throwing bricks and stones from inside a mosque at the young Christian men's homes, the skirmish ended when an elderly female relative of the Christians was wounded in their courtyard, Gulshan Masih said. A few hours later, police officers arrived and took Masih's father, 55-year-old Bashir Masih, 55, and 50-year-old uncle, Pervaiz Masih, into custody.

21 February

Following the February 19 skirmish between young Muslims and Christians, police took into custody eight more Christians – Gulhan Masih, his cousin Amir Masih, Mehmood Masih, Irshad Masih, Kashif Masih, Qamar Masih, Khuram Masih and Akmal Masih – based on charges that the Christians involved in the disagreement desecrated a mosque by throwing rocks at the mosque in retaliation to the brick being thrown at them from within the mosque.

23 February

A dozen armed Muslims stormed the Grace Ministry Church in Faisalabad, seriously wounding two Christians. Sajid Masih was hit by bullets and was in critical condition in hospital. Another member of the Protestant community, Boota Masih, was pushed from the roof - a height of about six meters - after being struck repeatedly with a rifle butt.

24 February

A handful of men seized Rinkel Kumari and delivered her a few hours later into the hands of a wealthy Muslim scholar, the man then called her parents, warning them that their daughter "wants to convert to Islam."

28 February

A young mother has been falsely accused of "blaspheming" Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, because she rebuffed attempts by relatives who had converted to Islam to force her to renounce her Christian faith, family members said.

1 March

Two Christian hospital employees were abducted in Karachi last week. Police sources said they suspected the kidnappers had links with banned terrorist organizations. There was a strong possibility that Islamic extremists took the two workers of South Korea-based Good Samaritan Hospital, Issac Samson and Indrias Javaid, to Pakistan's tribal areas after kidnapping them.

3 March

Asha Kumari, a 16-year-old Hindu disappeared from a beauty parlor in Jacobabad where she was taking a beautician's course.

13 April

Asha Kumari, who was kidnapped on March 3, was missing until she appeared with her new husband at the Supreme Court. She told the court she had willingly married and embraced Islam.

8 May

A band of Muslims this month severely beat a pregnant Christian woman in Punjab's Narowal district - causing her to lose female twins to miscarriage - in an effort pressure her family into dropping charges of raping her 13-year-old niece.

20 August

Pakistani authorities arrested a Christian girl and are investigating whether she violated the country's strict blasphemy laws after furious neighbors surrounded her house and demanded police take action. She reportedly burned pages from the Koran. The girl, 11-year-old Rimsha Masih, is mentally handicapped.

21 August

Police in Faisalabad found the horribly mutilated body of Suneel Masih. They boy a Christian orphan from the city had disappeared two days earlier.

8 September

After spending three weeks in Adial Jail Rawalpindi, a Pakistani Christian girl accused of blasphemy against the holy Quran, Muslims' holy book, has been freed on bail.

21 September

Islamic extremists have attacked an Anglican church in Mardan, Pakistan, and an adjoining school. Some believe the stimulus was the government announced day of protest against an anti-Islam film.

24 September

Shumaila Bibi was seized at dawn, forced to endure sexual abuse and to marry the young Muslim man who abducted her with the help of his family and convert to Islam.

3 October

Shumaila Bibi escaped her kidnapper and returned to her family. Her so-called "husband" denounced her flight and with his parents - reversing the facts - reported her family for "kidnapping" her. The police accepted his version of the facts and have opened an investigation claiming that the girl converted and married "of her own free will."

9 October

A Taliban gunman walked up to a bus taking children home from school in Pakistan's volatile Swat Valley and shot and wounded a 14-year-old activist known for championing the education of girls and publicizing atrocities committed by the Taliban. The school bus containing the activist was about to leave the school grounds in Mingora when a bearded man approached it and asked which one of the girls was Malala. Another girl pointed to Malala, but the activist denied it was her and the gunmen then shot both of the girls, the police chief said.

18 October

Mr. Riaz Ahmad Basra, an Ahmadi, was shot dead in Ghatialian, District Sialkot.

19 October

Mr. Saad Farooq was returning home after attending congregational prayers with his family. Farooq, an Ahmadi, was riding his motorcycle while his family travelled in a car. Unknown men, also on a motorcycle approached him from behind and shot him in the head. Farooq died on the spot. The assailants then turned their attention to the car in which Farooq's father, brother, father-in-law and others were seated and opened fire. Three of them were injured and taken to a hospital.

23 October

Raja Abdul Hamid Khan and Mr. Bashir Ahmad, both Ahmadis, were killed in Baldia Town.

Violence against the Ahmadi community, a religious minority continues unabated

(This is Part II of a series of articles on the problems of religious minorities in Pakistan)

Asian Human Rights Commission (15.10.2012) - With its reelection to the Human Rights Council Pakistan must now show the world that it is serious about fulfilling its international obligations. One area that needs urgent attention is the violence committed against religious minorities, in particular the harassment and violence perpetrated against the Ahmadis, which often happens with the cooperation of the police.

On October 19 Mr. Saad Farooq was returning home after attending congregational

prayers with his family. Farooq, an Ahmadi, was riding his motorcycle while his family travelled in a car. Unknown men, also on a motorcycle approached him from behind and shot him in the head. Farooq died on the spot. The assailants then turned their attention to the car in which Farooq's father, brother, father-in-law and others were seated and opened fire. Three of them were injured and taken to a hospital.

Mr. Saad Farooq was an active member of the Karachi Ahmadi community. Recently married he leaves behind a grieving widow. He was 26 years-of-age.

A few weeks earlier on October 4, Khawaja Zahur Ahmad (64), was shot dead near his home in Satellite Town. The bullet struck him below the right ear. Friends and neighbours rushed him to the hospital but he died en route. A few months prior to Ahmad's assassination religious extremists had gathered outside his home shouting slogans. Ahmad was a peaceful and respectable citizen and had no dispute with anyone. He was killed only for his faith.

Mr. Riaz Ahmad Basra was shot dead in Ghatialian, District Sialkot on October 18. Raja Abdul Hamid Khan and Mr. Bashir Ahmad were killed in Baldia Town four days later, on October 23 and the list goes on and on and on. These were targeted killings of Ahmadis.

On August 20 in Ghatialian, the police registered a case against four Ahmadis after they received the complaint of a mulla, Qari Afzal. The reason behind the complaint was that they had hurt his feelings and intimidated him. Those named in the case were Mr. Naeem Ahmad, Mr. Gulfam Naeem, Mr. Ahsan Ramzan and Mr. Shahid Abdullah. Interestingly, three of the accused were not even present at the time of the alleged incident which would appear to indicate that it was a fabricated charge. At the initial hearing temporary bail was obtained for them. However, on October 15, the Additional Session Judge of Pasoor changed the applied penal code in the case with PPC 298-C, an anti-Ahmadiyya clause, and rejected the temporary bail. The police arrested all the accused and sent them to jail until a new bail application was moved in the Magistrate's Court which was granted on October 23. The accused still face trial.

Anti Ahmadiyya activities are nothing new but incidents have risen steeply in District Hafizabad with the desecration of an Ahmadiyya graveyard by the police. This was done on the instructions of a group of mullas. The police officials urged the Ahmadis to commit the desecration themselves and when they refused a group of men went to the cemetery and erased Islamic inscriptions from the gravestones.

The problems for the Ahmadis started with the amendment to the Constitution in 1973 during the reign of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto which declared them as 'non-Muslim'. However, it was during the regime of General Zia Ul Haq that they were truly disenfranchised. Ahmadis were denied the right to declare themselves as Muslim. They were not allowed to build mosques similar to those of the Muslims. They could not write or inscribe Quranic verses on their walls of their mosques. And as mentioned earlier, even inscribing Quranic verses on their gravestones left them open to attack by religious zealots.

Sadly the sectarian prejudice against Ahmadis even extends to their right to education; another area in which the government has failed miserably to live up to its responsibilities.

Ms Afshan Malik was a student in the Government Degree College for Women, Gulshane Ravi, Lahore. Ms. Malik participated in the *Natiya* (poems in the honour of the Holy Prophet PBUH) competition in the Punjab Youth Festival. The Chief Minister of the Punjab, who was present at the event liked her recital so much that he asked to recite another *Naat* while the results was being compiled. She did so and was loudly applauded by the audience. She was awarded the first prize and a trophy.

After a few days her rivals came to that the two *Naats* she recited were written by the Ahmadi elders and started to harass her in the college. They tried even get a police case registered against her and when the situation became serious she had to discontinue her studies. Later, for their safety the entire family had to shift their residence.

Once again the question begs to be asked: where is the religious freedom that Ms. Hina Rabbani Khar spoke of in her address to the United Nations at the Universal Periodic Review? Now that Pakistan has been reelected to the Human Rights Council this must be the time for the government of President Asif Ali Zardari to live up, not only to the pledges it made to the UN four years ago but more importantly, to the wording in the country's Constitution which guarantees freedom of religion for all.

Pakistan's minority Hindus feel under attack

(08.11.2012) AP — They came after dusk and chanted into the night sky "Kill the Hindus, kill the children of the Hindus," as they smashed religious icons, ripped golden bangles off women's arms and flashed pistols. It wasn't the first time that the Hindu temple on the outskirts of Pakistan's largest city was attacked, and residents here fear it will not be the last.

"People don't consider us as equal citizens. They beat us whenever they want," said Mol Chand, one of the teenage boys gathered at the temple. "We have no place to worship now."

It was the second time the Sri Krishna Ram temple has been attacked, and this time the mob didn't even bother to disguise their faces. The small temple, surrounded by a stone wall, is a tiny religious outpost in a dusty, hardscrabble neighborhood so far on the outskirts of the city that a sign on the main road wishes people leaving Karachi a good journey.

Local Muslim residents blamed people from a nearby ethnic Pashtun village for the attack, which took place in late September on the Day of Love for the Prophet, a national holiday declared by the government in response to an anti-Islam film made in the U.S. No one was seriously injured in the attack.

It was the latest in a rising tide of violence and discrimination against Hindus in this 95 percent Muslim country, where Islamic extremism is growing. Pakistan's Hindu community says it faces forced conversions of Hindu girls to Islam, a lack of legal recognition for their marriages, discrimination in services and physical abuse when they venture into the streets.

The story of the Hindu population in Pakistan is one of long decline. During partition in 1947, the violent separation of Pakistan and India into separate countries, hundreds of thousands of Hindus opted to migrate to India where Hinduism is the dominant religion. Those that remained and their descendants now make up a tiny fraction of Pakistan's estimated 190 million citizens, and are mostly concentrated in Sindh province in the southern part of the country.

Signs of their former stature abound in Karachi, the capital of Sindh. At the 150-year-old Swami Narayan Temple along one of the city's main roads, thousands of Hindus gather during the year to celebrate major religious holidays. Hindus at the 200-year-old Laxmi

Narain Temple scatter the ashes of their cremated loved ones in the waters of an inlet from the Arabian Ocean.

But there are also signs of how far the community has fallen. Residents in a city hungry for land have begun to build over Hindu cemeteries, the community's leaders say. Hindus helped build Karachi's port decades ago, but none work there now.

Estimates of the size of the Hindu population in Pakistan are all over the map — from 2.5 million or 10 million in Sindh province alone to 7 million across the country — a reflection of the fact that the country hasn't had a census since 1998.

It isn't just Hindus who are facing problems. Other minorities like Christians, the mystical Muslim branch of Sufis and the Ahmadi sect have found themselves under attack in Pakistan, where the rise of Muslim fundamentalists has sometimes unleashed a violent opposition against those who don't follow their strict religious tenets.

The discrimination has prompted some Hindus to leave for India, activists warn, though the extent is not known. Around 3,000 Hindus left this year, part of a migration that began four years ago, sparked by discrimination and a general rise in crime in Sindh, said DM Maharaj, who heads an organization to help Hindus called Pakistan Hindu Sabha.

He said he recently talked to a group of Hindus preparing to move to India from rural Sindh, complaining that they can't eat in Muslim restaurants or that Muslim officials turned them down for farming loans. Even during recent floods, they said Muslims did not want them staying in the same refugee camps.

Other Hindu figures such as provincial assembly member Pitamber Sewami deny there's a migration at all, in a reflection of how sensitive the issue is. Earlier this year, there were a string of reports in Pakistani media about Hindus leaving the country, sparking a flurry of promises by Pakistani officials to investigate.

In India, a Home office official said the Indian government noticed an upward trend of people coming from Pakistan but called reports of Pakistanis fleeing to India "exaggerated." He said he does not have exact figures on how many Pakistani Hindus have stayed in India after entering the country on tourist visas. The official spoke on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the topic.

There's more of a consensus of the seriousness of the problem of forced conversion of Hindus.

Zohra Yusuf, the president of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan says the pattern goes like this: A Hindu girl goes missing and then resurfaces days or weeks later married to a Muslim boy. During court hearings to determine whether the conversion was voluntary, students from nearby Islamic schools called madrassas often flood the room, trying to intimidate the judges by chanting demands that the conversion be confirmed.

Maharaj says he's tried to intervene in roughly 100 cases of forced conversions but has only succeeded in returning a girl safely back to her family once. If a girl decides to renounce Islam and return to Hinduism, she could be signing a death warrant for herself and her family even if her conversion was forced.

The Hindu community has also been hurt by a lack of unity within its ranks. Hindu society within Pakistan and elsewhere has historically been divided by caste, a system of social stratification in which the lower castes are often seen as inferior. Members of the lower castes in Pakistan say it wasn't until two girls from a high-caste family were forcibly

converted this year that high-caste Hindus took the issue seriously, although it's been happening for years.

"We always fight our war ourselves," said Bholoo Devjee, a Hindu activist from Karachi, speaking about the lower castes.

In recent months the government has begun to take the concerns of the Hindu community more seriously. In Sindh province, legislators proposed a law to prevent forced conversions in part by implementing a waiting period before a marriage between a Hindu and a Muslim can go forward, and there's discussion about proposing such a law on the national level as well.

In the case of the Sri Krishna Ram temple, law enforcement authorities opened a blasphemy case against the people who rampaged through the building. But residents here are skeptical that these developments signify any long-term improvement in their plight. Weeks after the incident no arrests have been made, and the Hindus complain that no high-ranking Hindu officials have come to visit them or help them get compensation.

Sunda Maharaj, the spiritual leader at the temple, which was first attacked in January 2011, said he and the other residents do not want to move to India. "We are Pakistani," he said.

But he would like more help from the government, specifically a checkpoint to stop people from getting close to the temple and money for the Hindus to buy weapons.

"Next time anyone comes we can kill them or die defending our temple," he said.

Taliban shoot teenage Pakistani girl activist outside school

AP (09.10.2012) - A Taliban gunman walked up to a bus taking children home from school in Pakistan's volatile Swat Valley on Tuesday and shot and wounded a 14-year-old activist known for championing the education of girls and publicizing atrocities committed by the Taliban, officials said.

The attack in the city of Mingora targeted 14-year-old Malala Yousufzai, who is widely respected for her work to promote the schooling of girls -- something that the Taliban strongly opposes. She was nominated last year for the International Children's Peace Prize.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, calling Malala's work "obscenity."

"This was a new chapter of obscenity, and we have to finish this chapter," said Taliban spokesman Ahsanullah Ahsan by telephone. "We have carried out this attack."

The school bus was about to leave the school grounds in Mingora when a bearded man approached it and asked which one of the girls was Malala, said Rasool Shah, the police chief in the town. Another girl pointed to Malala, but the activist denied it was her and the gunmen then shot both of the girls, the police chief said.

Malala was shot twice -- once in the head and once in the neck -- but her wounds were not life-threatening, said Tariq Mohammad, a doctor at the main hospital in Mingora. The second girl shot was in stable condition, the doctor said. Pakistani television showed pictures of Malala being taken by helicopter to a military hospital in the frontier city of Peshawar.

In the past, the Taliban has threatened Malala and her family for her activism. When she was only 11 years old, she began writing a blog under a pseudonym for the BBC's Urdu service about life under Taliban occupation. After the Taliban were ejected from the Swat Valley in the summer of 2009, she began speaking out publicly about the militant group and the need for girls' education.

While chairing a session of a children's assembly supported by UNICEF in the valley last year, the then-13-year-old championed a greater role for young people.

"Girl members play an active role," she said, according to an article on the U.N. organization's website. "We have highlighted important issues concerning children, especially promoting girls' education in Swat."

The attack displayed the viciousness of Islamic militants in the Swat Valley, where the military conducted a major operation in 2009 to clear out insurgents. It was a reminder of the challenges the government faces in keeping the area free of militant influence.

The scenic valley -- nicknamed the Switzerland of Pakistan -- was once a popular tourist destination for Pakistanis, and honeymooners used to vacation in the numerous hotels dotted along the river running through Swat. But the Taliban's near-total takeover of the valley just 175 miles (280 kilometers) from the capital in 2008 shocked many Pakistanis, who considered militancy to be a far-away problem in Afghanistan or Pakistan's rugged tribal regions.

Militants began asserting their influence in Swat in 2007 -- part of a wave of Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters expanding their reach from safe havens near the Afghan border. By 2008 they controlled much of the valley and began meting out their own brand of justice.

They forced men to grow beards, restricted women from going to the bazaar, whipped women they considered immoral and beheaded opponents.

During the roughly two years of their rule, Taliban in the region destroyed around 200 schools. Most were girls' institutions, though some prominent boys' schools were struck as well.

At one point, the Taliban said they were halting female education, a move that echoed their militant brethren in neighboring Afghanistan who during their rule barred girls from attending school.

While the Pakistani military managed to flush out the insurgents during the military operation, their Taliban's top leadership escaped, leaving many of the valley's residents on edge.

Kamila Hayat, a senior official of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, praised Malala for standing up to the militants and sending a message across the world that Pakistani girls had the courage to fight for their rights. But she also worried that Tuesday's shooting would prevent other parents from letting their children speak out against the Taliban.

"This is an attack to silence courage through a bullet," Hayat said. "These are the forces who want to take us to the dark ages."

The problems of young women in Pakistan were also the focus of a separate case before the high court, which ordered a probe into an alleged barter of seven girls to settle a blood feud in a remote southwestern district. Such feuds in Pakistan's tribal areas often arise from disputes between families or tribes and can last generations.

Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry began proceedings into the allegations, which were first reported in the local media. The alleged trade happened in the Dera Bugti district of Baluchistan province between two groups within the Bugti tribe, one of the more prominent in the province.

A tribal council ordered the barter in early September, the district deputy commissioner, Saeed Faisal, told the court. He did not know the girls' ages but local media reported they were between 4 and 13 years old.

However, the Advocate General for the province could not confirm the incident.

Chaudhry, the chief justice, ordered Faisal to ensure that all members of the tribal council appear in court on Wednesday, as well as a local lawmaker who belongs to one of the two sub-tribes believed involved in the incident.

The tradition of families exchanging unmarried girls to settle feuds is banned under Pakistani law but still practiced in the country's more conservative, tribal areas.

24-year old Christian abducted, forced to convert to Islam and marry her abuser

Shumaila Bibi kidnapped by a 26 year old Muslim Muhammad Javed Iqbal on the way home. Subjected to sexual assault and forced to study the Koran. On a pretext she managed to escape and return to her family. Her captor denounced the girl's father for "kidnapping" her. Shumaila's future hangs in the balance.

AsiaNews - Seized at dawn, forced to endure sexual abuse and to marry the young Muslim man who abducted her with the help of his family and convert to Islam. This is the dramatic story of Shumaila Bibi, a 24-year old Christian who worked in Nishatabad, a suburb of Faisalabad (Punjab), in a textile company. The episode dates back to September 24, and for days she was subjected to a daily nightmare with her tormentor; on October 5, using a ruse, she managed to escape. However, her so-called "husband" denounced her flight and with his parents - reversing the facts - reported her family for "kidnapping" her. The police accepted his version of the facts and have opened an investigation claiming that the girl converted and married "of her own free will." The future of Sumaila is hanging by a thread and will depend on the decisions of the justice of Pakistan, who on more than one occasion have failed to protect the rights of religious minorities in the country.

At 6 in the morning of 24 September Shumaila Bibi, who worked in a textile company, had just finished her shift and was about to return home. On the way she ran into to the 26 year old Muslim Muhammad Javed Iqbal, who had approached her family with the intention, over time, of establishing an engagement (though "I refused and I have repeatedly discouraged it" the young woman tells AsiaNews). Despite all this, with the

help of his mother, two brothers, some uncles and the threat of a gun, Muhammad dragged the girl into a nearby vehicle.

At the time, there was only the guard of Millat Textile Mills factory to witness the scene. Threatened by the abductors family he did not intervene. The next day, Muhammad Javed Iqbal - along with 25 relatives - led Shumaila to a lawyer, Muhammad Tanveer Aslam. In his office, he forced her to sign a statement of intent, under which she declared her marriage to the young Muslim and conversion to Islam.

For days she was sexually abused, harassed and forced to study the Koran and the precepts of Islam. During one of these lessons she asked her Muslim teacher to be able to go home earlier than the scheduled time. Free to move, Shumaila escaped and returned to her parents' house. This, however, infuriated the groom who immediately reported the girl's parents to the police for ... "Kidnapping." The officials upheld his complaint because the young woman converted and consented to the marriage "of her own free will" and without compulsion.

The Catholic activists of the National Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Church of Pakistan (NCJP) have taken up the defense of Mansha Masih, girl's father, 68, who now risks prison for kidnapping. The lawyers have filed a counter complaint and now seek justice, though on several occasions the will of the majority and Islamic law have dominated in spite of the rule of law, to decide on the matter. Her future is hanging by a thread and there is a real fear she will be returned to her torturers. Interviewed by *AsiaNews*, Shumaila confirmed that she wants to "live with my parents and practice the Christian faith." The young Muslim helped her find a job and with this "subterfuge" introduced himself into the family and tried to approach her. "But I refused - she clarifies - several times and I invited to desist" from his intent. "And for that, he ruined my life."

Fr. Nisar Barkat, diocesan director of NCJP in Faisalabad, said that "we do our best to provide aid and assistance to victims like Shumaila." The priest invokes the "intervention" of the police to "ensure the legality and freedom" of the community. "We have to be careful - he warns - of the manipulation of religion in the name of justice, and the state must guarantee religious freedom in the country."

Could this be the beginning of the end for Pakistan's blasphemy laws?

A positive move by local police after a Hindu temple was attacked.

New Statesman (02.10.2012) - Most people have heard of Pakistan's blasphemy law. Carrying the death penalty or life imprisonment for anyone who criticises the Prophet Muhammed or the Qur'an, it gained renewed international scrutiny this year after Rimsha Malik, a young Christian girl apparently suffering from Down's Syndrome, was arrested in Islamabad. She was subsequently freed and a Muslim cleric now stands accused of fabricating evidence against her.

While it was highly unusual that she was freed at all - alleged blasphemers are rarely let off, and even if they are released, are at high risk of vigilante justice - the jumped up charges against her were less so. As I wrote last year, the light burden of proof means that the law is frequently used as a weapon against Pakistan's religious minorities:

"Hardly any evidence is required - the accuser can even refuse to repeat the blasphemy in court for fear of committing the crime himself - and so the law is frequently used as a means of settling personal scores or stirring up sectarian tension."

But could that be changing? Here in Karachi, protests against the anti-Islam film that have caused rallies across the Muslim world turned violent. One of the incidents on 21 September was an attack on a Hindu Temple on the outskirts of the city. Protesters attacked the Sri Krishna Ram temple, breaking religious statues, tearing up the Bhagavad Gita (the holy book), and assaulting the temple's caretaker.

Community leaders took the unusual step of going to the police, who have announced that the case against nine attackers has been registered under Section 295-A of the blasphemy laws. This lesser known section, which covers the "outraging of religious feelings", can apply to any religion and carries a fine or imprisonment of up to 10 years.

Of course, this case does not represent a sea-change in attitudes just yet. For a start, no one has been charged, or even arrested. But it was a positive move by local police, if only because Pakistan's religious minorities are frequently too frightened to speak out at all. Numbering about four per cent of the population, this small minority of Christians, Hindus and Islamic sects such as the Ahmadis (regarded as non-Muslims) translates to nearly ten million people, the equivalent of the population of Tunisia. It is not an insignificant number.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has offered measured support for the move, with the chair, Zohra Yusuf, saying that she has never heard of another blasphemy case registered against Muslims for damaging a house of worship. However, she pointed out that blasphemy laws are never used when Ahmadi houses of worship are attacked, as the often are. Four attacks on churches in Karachi earlier this year have also gone unpunished.

But the potential application of the blasphemy law against Muslims and in defence of a minority faith is an interesting development. Past events have put paid to any political appetite to change or scrap the law. Last year, two ministers who criticised it were assassinated, with the reform shelved soon afterwards, and it retains mass support. If the law is not going to be eliminated or modified (which looks extremely unlikely), it could at least be made fairer in its application. Anything that reduces its power as a hammer with which to beat minorities is a step in the right direction, however modest.

Pakistani Church and school burned by Islamic extremists

By Jeremy Reynolds

ASSIST News Service (25.09.2012) - Islamic extremists have attacked an Anglican church in Mardan, Pakistan, and an adjoining school. Some believe the stimulus was the government announced day of protest against an anti-Islam film.

The attack occurred on Sept. 21.

According to a news release from the British Pakistani Christian Association (BPCA), protesters set the church and school on fire and looted the premises, taking everything from computers to chairs and whatever else seemed valuable from the school.

The BPCA said that Muslims desecrated Bibles and religious artifacts, especially many of which were used in ceremonies within the Anglican church. Many were brought out into the public compound of the church and were set on fire.

The BPCA is concerned that similar incidents will reverberate throughout Pakistan.

According to additional information received by the ASSIST News Service, the Bishop of Peshawar the Rt. Rev. Humphrey Peters condemned the attack and appealed for support from the Anglican Communion. He said, "The damage has been very severe, and we will need to rebuild. We are asking for people around the world to keep us in your prayers."

The Moderator of the Church of Pakistan, Most Rev. Samuel Azariah Samuel condemned the attack.

He said, "This news is very damaging to relations between the communities in Pakistan and around the world. The government and faith leaders in Pakistan have a role to play in education people that they have the right to protest, but to damage property and terrify people in this way is completely wrong. The government and faith leaders should provide the lead in preventing attacks."

The Diocese of Peshawar, where the attack took place, provides education and health services to the local community – Muslim and Christian alike – and provided substantial support to victims of floods and a major earthquake in recent years, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Wilson Chowdhry of the BPCA said in the news release, "No Christian in Pakistan is safe. Any community whether in a city or in a more rural location can at any time become the target of similar aggression. Please pray for all Christian brothers and sisters in Pakistan."

Pakistani Christians and Muslims condemn blasphemous film about Muhammad

Hundreds of people demonstrated in different cities. The Diocesan Commission for Interreligious Dialogue in Faisalabad organizes a Muslim-Christian meeting. Fr. Mendes: terrible to offend the sensibilities of Muslims. Muslim leader: the authors must be tried by "Sharia courts." And thanks to Christians for solidarity.

By Shafique Khokhar

Asia News - The wave of protests against the blasphemous film about Muhammad, which has inflamed many Muslim majority countries has 'arrived in Pakistan Over the past few days protests have been held in several cities. Hundreds of people chanted slogans condemning the film "Innocence of Muslims" and the Christian community has sympathized with the Muslim majority condemning a work of little artistic value and offensive to Islam. The Diocesan Commission for Interreligious Dialogue in Faisalabad, on the evening of September 15, called a press conference in the curia, which was attended by at least 50 prominent figures, Christian and Muslim. They expressed, together the strongest condemnation of the film, branded its authors as "agents of Satan" who deserve exemplary punishment.

The participants appealed to the U.S. government to ban the film, and they also call for the arrest of Pastor Terry Jones, Sam Beccia, the director, and other persons who participated in the production. They also specifically ask the Islamabad executive to demand an official apology from the U.S. embassy in Pakistan. The United Nations, say the Muslim-Christian leaders, must also be considered: these groups should be treated

the same way as terrorists because they affect the feelings of the faithful and "demolish peace in the world."

Fr Bonnie Mendes, a priest and former Secretary of the National Commission for Justice and Peace, says it's terrible "to offend the sensibilities of Muslim for sinister and evil interests." The Muslim religious leader Muhammad Ibrahim requested the extradition to Pakistan of Pastor Jones and the author of the film, so they may be " tried by the Shariah courts." He speaks of a "conspiracy" of the Jewish and the U.S lobby. against Islam and thanks "minorities" for their "strong condemnation" of the film.

For the director of the Diocesan Commission for Interreligious Dialogue, Fr. Aftab James Paul, freedom of thought "should never mean hurting the feelings of others." The priest announces a letter to the U.S. consulate in Pakistan and will raise the issue with UN officials in the country. Finally, Fr. Khalid Yousaf calls for "respect" for religion, and the end of these "blasphemous acts."

To "avenge" the broadcast of the film that [offends](#) the figure of Muhammad, on 11 September, an armed group attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi (Libya). In the attack, Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three of his co-workers [lost their lives](#). The protest against the film has since [spread](#) to other Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as India and Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world.

Pakistani Christian girl arrested for blasphemy released from jail

By Aftab Alexander Mughal

E-Magazine Minorities Concern of Pakistan (07.09.2012) - After spending three weeks in Adial Jail Rawalpindi, a Pakistani Christian girl accused of blasphemy against the holy Quran, Muslims' holy book, has been freed on bail on Sept. 8. She was taken from the prison in a helicopter to an unknown location. According to police sources, the girl has shifted to a safe place in another city where she joined her family.

Rimsha Masih, an illiterate and mentally disabled 14-years old Christian girl, was granted bail a day before by the Additional District and Sessions Judge Mohammad Azam Khan in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, against a surety bond of Rs 1 million (\$10,000) in Pakistan's harsh blasphemy law, which was imposed by a military dictator Genral Zia-ul-Haq in 1980s to Islamise the country.

Rimsha, has been suffering from Down's syndrome, which is associated with a delay in cognitive ability and physical growth, and was a resident of Mera Jafar, neighbourhood on Islamabad's outskirts. A medical report, conducted by a medical board on the court orders, disclosed that she was 14 years old but had the mental capability of a seven-year-old.

During the court hearing, according to the New York Times, outside the courtroom, a group of children with Down syndrome held a banner that read, "We want to meet Down syndrome girl Rimsha."

The sacrilege of the holy Quran is regarded as a serious crime in Pakistan and can easily spark public violent towards the accused person and one's community, especially against non-Muslims in Pakistan.

For the registration of FIR (First Information Report) and her immediate arrest, Muslim protesters blocked the Kashmir Highway, damaged public and private property and also smashed cars to show their anger. They were dispersed only after the police lodged an FIR against Rimsha and arrested her. Although the police have also registered FIR against 165 Muslim men creating law and order situation, nobody has been arrested yet.

While some protesters wanted to put her house and other Christian houses on fire, fortunately some Muslim men intervened, which saved from any damage. However, following the incident, at least 400 Christians, mainly poor labourers, left their homes because of the fear of their lives and spent days in a nearby jungle. Some Christian families have come back, but are still living under fear of backlash.

The FIR against Rimsha was registered on the complaint of a local Muslim man Syed Muhammad Ummad, who runs a CNG car-fitting shop. Ummad claimed that he had discovered the burning of the Noorani Qaida (a booklet said to learn the basics of Arabic, the language of holy Quran) from Rimsha. She wanted to throw them in garbage after putting it in a plastic bag. However, Ayaz Mir, a Muslim member of the National Assembly writes in a newspaper article that the Nurani Qaida, a helpful primer for mastering the Arabic alphabet, preparatory to reading the Quran...pages not from the Quran.

After the arrest, Rimsha was sent to the Adiala jail Rawalpindi on judicial remand, charged under a blasphemy law Section 295-B of Pakistan Penal Code (PPC). The Section 295-B, Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) of blasphemy laws was introduced in 1982 by General Zia-ul-Haq, a military dictator who rules the country for 10 years. This particular law is against the desecration of the holy Quran, which says, "Whoever wilfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Quran or of an extract there from or uses it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life."

Interior Minister Rehman Malik told the Senate, upper of the parliament, on Sept. 7, the ashes found in Rimsha's bag were not from paper but from wood.

The police detained Chishti under section 295-B of PPC of the blasphemy law for tampering with the evidence of Rimsha, and was sent to jail on 14-day physical remand. It was the first time during the history of Pakistan that all three Muslim witnesses in a blasphemy case against a Christian gave statements against a Muslim religious leader and police arrested him without any hesitation. Now Chishti might get the same punishment which he wanted for Rimsha. Interestingly, there was no reaction have been seen from Muslim religious leaders against Chishti's arrest. For some, it would be a hopeful sign in the discourse of blasphemy laws throughout the country. Nadeem Anthony, a Christian lawyer from Lahore, disclosed that Christian lawyers would appear before the court against Chishti because he committed blasphemy, and he must be punished in accordance with the existing law.

Interestingly, Chairman All Pakistan Ulema Council Tahir Ashrafi, a Muslim religious leader, forward and demanded for an impartial inquiry of the case. He said during a Television talk show that one of his own sons is suffering from Down Syndrome, so he has known the pain and suffering of a family.

Many Christians and Muslims from Mera Jafar told the media that before the incident the relations between the two communities cooked for months as Chishti complained of the noise coming from the churches in the area during Sunday prayer services, and he wanted to expel Christians from the area. Some others believe that land mafia was behind the whole drama because they wanted to vacate the land to build a housing colony. As Mulana Tahir Ashrafi disclosed that it was an issue of 500 Kanals of land.

The Interior Ministry, Intelligence Bureau and Islamabad Police Special Branch suggested to the police to oppose her bail because it would put Rimsha's live in danger. However, on Sept. 7, after a heated debate between the both sides – the accuser's lawyer and the defence council – the court accepted her bail. "The decision is highly unusual in blasphemy cases. Such is the public hysteria, judges are under intense pressure to refuse bail and find defendants guilty," daily Telegraph stated.

Before the final hearing, Rao Abdur Raheem, 32-years-old attorney for the complainant and chairman of Namoos-e-Risalat Lawyers' Forum (protect the dignity of the Prophet (PBUH)), threatened that if Rimsha is not convicted, Muslims could take the law into their own hands, and added that there are many Mumtaz Qadris in the country. Qadri is an assassin who gunned down Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer last year because he voiced for the reform of the blasphemy laws. For Raheem, Qadri, is a hero, and he has hung his poster in his office. Raheem was one of the lawyers who represented Qadri and also represents the accused in the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's murder case. He believes that charges against Chishti are part of the efforts of the state machinery to grant bail to Rimsha. The News on Sunday reported on Sept. 9, "Some of Rao's colleagues think he is affiliated to a banned sectarian outfit. He has already submitted two different applications with the Islamabad police station for registering a case against the Geo TV under blasphemy law as it aired blasphemous movies like The Message and the Tenth Commandment."

Pakistan has a dark history of intolerance, and its controversial blasphemy laws have often been used as a tool to persecute minorities, particularly Christians and Ahmadis, members of a Muslim sect viewed by most Pakistanis as traitors to Islam because they revere another prophet in addition to Muhammad. Muslims themselves are also frequent victims of abuse of the law, daily Los Angeles Times says.

Along with many other human rights organisation, the World Council of Churches (WCC) also showed its concern towards the treatment of minorities in Pakistan. The WCC said on Sept. 5, minority religious communities in Pakistan are living in 'fear and terror' of Islamic fundamentalists amid abductions and forced conversions that the government is helpless to stop.

The case of Rimsha, a minor and mentally ill girl, raises a fundamental issue about the growing intolerance into the Pakistani society. The real problem continues to be the routine discrimination, persecution and violence religious minorities, including Christians, Ahmadis, Hindus and Sikhs under the blasphemy laws.

During a seminar organised by Pak Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) on Aug. 28, 2012, religious scholars and members of civil society blamed social pressure and lack of education among the masses for the mistrust between Muslims and minority communities, which often results in clashes.

Discussing the issue of blasphemy against the holy Quran, Fauzia Minallah says, sacred Quranic verses are irresponsibly scattered throughout the printed material available in Pakistan. Quranic verses are strewn all over newspapers, especially those in the regional languages. They are on the first page of many ABC books for children. They appear in Urdu, social studies, geography, history and even science books. Thus, they have the potential of becoming death traps for little children and the illiterate. "Next time, we should not be shocked when an even younger child is accused of blasphemy. Her or his 'disrespect' of Holy Scripture will bring even worse treatment than Rimsha's," she writes in The Friday Times of Set.7, 2012.

Rimsha's case has also reflected the poor conditions of Christians in Pakistan, who make up two per cent of the total population of the country, and experiencing daily

discrimination. Mainly, they have low-level jobs, such as sweepers. Generally, they often live in shantytowns with makeshift churches and practice their religion in a very unassuming manner.

The country's blasphemy laws are regularly being used to persecute religious minorities, especially poor Christians, and settle personal vendettas.

Since 1980s, when General Zia-ul-Haq introduced blasphemy laws, around 4000 cases have been reported and around 1000 of them have been registered. Non-Muslims, who are four per cent of Pakistan's population, are 57 per cent of those charged with blasphemy, the majority of cases are filed in Punjab (around 80 per cent Christians live in this province) where sectarian and militant groups are roaming around without any check because the provincial government of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz Group) is sympathetic to them.

Since 1990, fifty-two (52) people have been extra-judicially murdered on charges of blasphemy, 25 were Muslims, 15 were Christians, five were Ahmadis, one was Buddhist and one was Hindu, according to the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS), a research group based in Islamabad.

Known blasphemy cases in Pakistan show that from 1953 to July 2012, there were 434 'offenders' in Pakistan, among them 258 were Muslims, 114 Christians, 57 Ahmadis and four Hindus.

Tahir-ul-Qadri, a renowned Islamic scholar, has said that he had many reservations on all administrative and procedural points of blasphemy law, adding that it needs a lot of reforms and amendments. During an interview with a Danish TV channel (on Sept. 7), Tahir-ul-Qadri said that he had a difference of opinion with the blasphemy law in its existing forms.

A Christian leader Bishop Dr Ijaz Inayat said the basic fault about blasphemy laws is in the Constitution of Pakistan and in the mind-set of the extremists. "It is not only a religious or communal issue but a humanitarian one," he added.

Human rights groups have been demanding for the repeal of these laws. Because the political governments are often weak and the state has been supporting, directly or indirectly, those groups which promote intolerance and violence in the country. Therefore, it seems difficult at this stage that these laws will be repealed easily. However, a less violent reaction in Rimsha's case provided some hope that the present government, though it is very weak, can bring some procedural changes so people should not use these laws for their own interests.

Pakistan has witnessed in the past that the blasphemy allegations have led to mob violence against accused persons. As a result, even Rimsha's release from the court would put her life in danger so her security remains a major issue. Now Rimsha, her family and the Christian community must be saved from mob violence, and the state should review the blasphemy laws those put many innocent people's lives on risk.

A journalist was beaten by religious fanatics for watching television programmes considered unsuitable by a particular sect

The Asian Human Rights Commission (07.09.2012) - The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has received information that a journalist was attacked and beaten by Muslim fundamentalists for watching television and listening to some religious music which were against the particular sect of the attackers. Police refused to take action because of the involvement of a powerful Islamic seminary. His neighbours are worried about the increasing intimidation and death threats in the name of actual image of Islam which does not allow music and songs. The elected members from the community are refusing to support the people from their electoral constituency.

It has become difficult if not dangerous for young people, particularly women of the community to move about freely as they are constantly being watched by the extremists. The ongoing impotency of the authorities to reign in the extremist activities of the zealots will only encourage them and one day, sooner rather than later, there will be carnage in the streets carried out in the name of Islam.

Case narrative:

Mr. Zainul Abedin, son of Khalid Bin Abdul Qadir, resident of A-305, block 2, Gulsha-e-Iqbal, Karachi, the op-ed editor of The News, was attacked and beaten on August 27, at around 11 pm, by four persons when he was in his own house relaxing with his younger sister. He heard noises outside his house and noticed four men kicking at the gate and hurling abuse. As he opened the gate to talk to them he was surrounded and grabbed, with one of the men saying: "You are very fond of watching television and Qawalis, (a mystic and religious song), but you will not be so after today". When he enquired who they were and why they should have a problem with how he lives in his own house unless it affected them in any way, one of them said They do have a problem with these things particularly about the mystic songs and then they threatened that they will teach him a lesson for not following their instructions.

After that they started beating him without allowing him to explain his position as being a journalist he was obliged to watch the television for 'breaking news'. One of them punched his face breaking the spectacles which he was wearing, which caused mild bleeding from the upper, outer part of his nose. As they delivered more kicks, slaps and blows, they kept saying, they will not let him go unless he repents and says he will not turn his TV on and will stop listening to any kind of music, even if it is Qawali (mystic songs). Then each one asked him to promise that he will not watch television from that day. The threats in urdu language were "Butaa, ub TV dehke ga, suney ga Qawali? Meanwhile his younger sister, the only other occupant of the house, had come out. As he was struggling to take her inside and close the gate, the men tried to enter in his house but Abedin quickly closed the gate. After injuring him they went away shouting abuse and threats such as "Next time it will be worse." "Do not turn on your TV and no songs and Qawalis here". "You will not live if it happens again." "You people and this house will be no more." "We will not break the windows, we will shoot you, kill you." (Phir thumarrey ghur per firing hogi, hum sheeshey nai thoren gay, thmuney jaan se maar den gey. Thumaara ye ghar nehi rehe ga)."

At this moment some neighbours from their houses watched the whole scene but they were so afraid that they did not interfere to stop the attack.

The landlord of the house, the next day, told him that the attackers live in the same area and are dangerous people with some twisted notions of right and wrong about the performance of religious rituals. His neighbours told him on the condition of anonymity that the attackers were from a particular sect of Islam and usually go door to door and pressure the neighbours to not watching television and listen to music. From time to time they check the houses by keeping their ears to the walls. These people are known for their intolerance of 'obscenities' such as music. His younger sister later told him that a fortnight or so ago, in his absence, two men (one of them now identified as one Mehboob) had come to his house and preached that TV, and music in particular, were Haraam (prohibited as a sin) in Islam and that good Muslims should avoid them.

The culprits have identified by the eye witnesses as Riaz, Fahad, Ohaad and Sa-ad son of Mehboob. In fact, the neighbours have complained to the elected representatives of the area that the extremists are constantly telling them how to live and dress and act. But as is typical in these cases the nothing has been done out of fear of upsetting them. It has become difficult if not dangerous for young people, particularly women of the community to move about freely as they are constantly being watched by the extremists.

Mr. Abedin, the victim, reported to the area police station, the Gulshan-e-Iqbal police station, on the same night and they replied that as it was already night and too late they would look into it the next morning. The next evening the police came to enquire after several repeated calls by the victim. The police party questioned him and his landlord but blatantly avoided visiting the attackers' residence.

He submitted another application to the police identifying the attackers and adding details of what he had discovered about them. The SHO and the police officials who had met him earlier were not available and to-date the police have not started any kind of investigation and have refused to file the First Information Report (FIR).

The younger sister of the victim has had to shift from the house and her education has suffered.

Suggested action:

Please write letters to the given authorities calling them to provide protection to the victim and his sister from the religious fundamentalists who are imposing their sectarian rules on the people by threatening them and beating for watching the television programs and listening the music. Please also urge them to take action against the officials of the Gulashan-e-Iqbal police station, Karachi for not protecting the citizens from the religious vandalism and providing support to the seminary people for their militancy. Also urge them to provide life security to the journalists at large from the htreats and intimidation.

**Faisalabad, brutal murder of 14 year old Christian boy,
his body dismembered and face disfigured**

Suneel Masih, an orphan, disappeared on August 19. His body was found two days later in a remote area. Some internal organs removed, probably for the black market. His face disfigured with acid. Police Officer confesses to never

having seen "such a murder." The Christian community calls for justice, but so far not even an investigation has been opened.

By Shafique Khokhar

AsiaNews (23.08.2012) - A brutal murder, of a shadowy nature, has shaken the Christian community in Pakistan already marked by the experience of a disabled girl imprisoned for blasphemy in Islamabad, 11-year-old Rimsha Masih. On 21 August the police in Faisalabad found the horribly mutilated body of Suneel Masih. They boy a Christian orphan from the city had disappeared two days earlier. Still shocked by the ferocity of the killers a police officer confided on the condition of anonymity to *AsiaNews*: "It's the first time - said the inspector - that I have ever seen such a murder ". The body was found with the ears, nose, tongue and limbs torn from the body, the belly ripped open and internal organs (including the liver and kidneys) taken, perhaps to be sold on the black market. The killers then poured acid on his face, perhaps to make him unrecognizable.

But investigators have yet to open an investigation into the terrible murder of the 14 year old orphan Christian, whose funeral took place yesterday in the presence of minority leader and local politicians. A protest march was held on the streets of Faisalabad, during which people repeatedly demanded "justice" for the 14 year old Suneel Masih (pictured). Tomorrow an autopsy will be held on the remains of the boy, to clarify whether there was also sexual violence before death.

According to the story of some witnesses informed of the facts, on August 19 last Suneel - a 5th class student - went to a shop in Liberty Market to buy a shirt. That night, the boy did not return home and the family raised the alarm. A desperate search began, which proved to be useless and his disappearance was reported to police. Two days later, on 21, police found the horribly mutilated corpse of the boy in an isolated industrial area.

The Christian community is in shock and demanding justice, perhaps in vain because so far the police have not even opened a formal investigation. Speaking to *AsiaNews*, Fr. Nisar Barkat, diocesan director of the National Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Church of Pakistan (NCJP), appealed to the government and law enforcement to bring the perpetrators to justice "as soon as possible." The Christian community, the priest adds, feels insecure and cannot stop thinking about this horrible case. Hindus and Christians "live in fear". The Christian MP of Punjab Joel Aamir Sohotra echoes this fear, saying that "this brutal murder poses a serious reflection on the freedoms enjoyed by minorities, because" we are not just in front of the murder of a Christian boy, but the freedom of all minorities. "

The Christian lawyer Kamal Chughtai confirms that he has never seen "such a thing, with this level of cruelty in my entire life." He strongly condemns this "atrocious" and calls for the immediate arrest of the culprits. And if they are not brought to justice in two days, as promised by the police, all the Christians in the city should take to the streets to demand justice.

Christian girl, possibly mentally handicapped, arrested in Pakistan and accused of 'blasphemy'

The Blaze (20.08.2012) - Pakistani authorities arrested a Christian girl and are investigating whether she violated the country's strict blasphemy laws after furious neighbors surrounded her house and demanded police take action, a police officer said Monday. She reportedly burned pages from the Koran.

The arrest of the girl and outrage among the local community demonstrates the deep emotion that suspected blasphemy cases can evoke in this conservative Muslim country, where rising extremism often means religious minorities live in fear of persecution.

In Pakistan, anyone found guilty of insulting Islam's Prophet Muhammad, or holy book, the Koran, can be sentenced to death, although they're rarely if ever executed.

A Pakistani police officer, Zabi Ullah, said Monday that the girl was arrested Thursday after hundreds of neighbors, angry over reports she had allegedly burned religious papers, gathered outside her house in a poor outlying district of the capital, Islamabad.

He said the police took the girl to the police station, and that she's been held for 14 days while authorities investigate.

"About 500-600 people had gathered outside her house in Islamabad, and they were very emotional, angry and they might have harmed her if we had not quickly reacted," he said.

"Some Muslims from the area claim the girl had burned pages of the Koran, and we are investigating, and we have not reached any conclusion," he said.

Another police official, Qasim Niazi, said when the girl was brought to the police station she had a shopping bag that contained various religious and Arabic-language papers that had been partly burned but no Koran.

Another police officer said the matter would likely be dropped once the investigation is completed and the atmosphere is defused, saying there was "nothing much to the case." He did not want to be identified due to the sensitivity of the case.

There were varying reports on the girl's age and whether she was mentally handicapped. Ullah said she was 16 while other officials have said she was either 12 or 11. Niazi said that when the girl was brought to the police station she was scared and unable to speak normally, but he did not know whether she was mentally handicapped.

Christians often live in fear that they will be accused of blasphemy, and many critics say the legislation is sometimes used to settle scores.

Angry mobs have been known to sometimes take the law into their own hands and beat or kill people who are accused of violating the blasphemy laws. In July, thousands of people dragged a Pakistani man accused of desecrating the Quran from a police station in the central Pakistani city of Bahawalpur, beat him to death and then set his body on fire.

Attempts to revoke or alter the blasphemy laws have been met with violent opposition, however.

Last year, two prominent Pakistani political figures who spoke out against the laws were killed, in attacks that raised concerns about the rise of religious extremism in Pakistan.

Liberal politician Salman Taseer was shot and killed by one of his own guards in January 2011, and in March 2011, militants gunned down Shahbaz Bhatti, the only Christian minister in Pakistan's Cabinet.

A spokesperson for Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, Farhatullah Babar, said the president has taken "serious note" of reports of the girl's arrest and has asked the Interior Ministry to look into the case.

Police remove Quranic verses from Ahmadi graves to 'avert clashes'

Express Tribune (18.08.2012) - A heavy police contingent on Friday, on the demand of a banned organisation, removed Quranic verses and religious texts written on tombstones of Ahmadi graves to save the area from clashes on religious grounds.

An application was moved to the area police of Uncha Mangat claiming Kassoki villagers' demands of the removal of Quranic verses and religious text from Ahmadi graves in the graveyard on Hafizabad-Sheikhupura Road.

The applicants threatened of religious clashes and bloodshed if this was not done.

The DPO Hafizabad asked the police station in charge to take appropriate steps for averting any untoward incident or clash on religious basis.

The local SHO summoned elders and notables of the Ahmadi community of the village who met him under the supervision of Nasir Javaid, acting Ameer Jamaat Ahmadiyya, Hafizabad.

The SHO, according to Nasir Javaid, asked them to remove religious inscriptions, adding that if they did not do so themselves, the police would take measures for removing them in order to maintain peace and tranquillity in the area.

When they disagreed, says Nasir, the police went on with the operation anyway and forcefully entered the graveyard and whitewashed all religious text from the graves late Friday.

Calling it a positive achievement, the SHO claimed that no case had been filed against the act as it was meant to save the locality from clashes.

Secretary Amoor-e-Aama, Jamaat Ahmadiyya Faisalabad, Syed Mahmood Ahmad Shah, however, criticized the action and said that the persecution of Ahmadis was wrong and may lead to increased hatred between the two communities.

He demanded that the government take appropriate steps to save the Ahmadi community from such "unjustified and cruel acts of other communities".

There are about 150 Ahmadi graves located in the graveyard while about 35 graves of Muslims are also found there.

Prior to declaring the Ahmadis a minority in 1974, Muslims used to bury their dead in this graveyard. Later, the graveyard was demarcated into two parts for burying Muslims and Ahmadis separately.

Forced conversions and religious intolerance forcing Hindus to abandon the country

By Altaf Hussain

Asian Human Rights Commission (15.08.2012) - The mass exodus of minority Hindus from Pakistan particularly from Sindh, has stirred the lethargic and ignorant government authorities who otherwise had kept mum over the security concerns of the Hindu community. Significant number of families of Pakistan's Hindu community particularly from Sindh, reportedly have started migrating to neighboring country, India, because of forced conversions, extortion and kidnapping for ransom.

Hindus, whose sizeable population lives in all the districts of Sindh, have been facing continued incidences of violence compelling them to live under the dark shadows of insecurity. The trend has continued for many years now. However, the recent spur of events has given impetus to the un-fortunate trend forcing the indigenous dwellers to abandon their motherland.

The current wave of migration started in the backdrop of a 14 year old girl (Manisha) from the Hindu community was abducted in Jacobabad town of Sindh which generated the fear of her being converted.

The aftermaths of the incidence have witnessed sudden mass departure of Hindus from different parts of Sindh and Baluchistan to India with some families rejecting the idea of permanent settlement and other sticking to the widely reported factor of migration for lifetime to India. It is of utmost significance to look into the issues to analyze the myth and reality behind Hindus abandoning Sindh.

Eashwar Lal, President Hindu panchayat, Sukker Division and Sukker district, however, categorically says that Hindus migrating to India in significant numbers are going due to the forced conversion of their girls, kidnappings and waning law and order situation for Hindus in particular in Sindh.

Eashwar Lal, repeatedly claims "our girls and women are not safe here", we do not want to abandon Sindh, but continuous onslaught on us and our women by the criminal elements and indifference towards our issues from law enforcement agencies and political representatives have pushed us to the wall to take these steps, he adds.

At the time of independence Hindus constituted about 15 percent of Sindh's population which was reduced to around 6.5 percent as indicated by 1998 Census.

The local landlords-cum politicians and the police have been blamed for their nefarious character of patronizing extortionists and criminals and other elements that carry out kidnappings of girls resulting in forced conversion, ransom and extortion.

"Police and local politicians have turned deaf ear to our grievances and due to that criminal elements are at large", deplores Eashwar.

He says that Hindu community in different districts of Sindh informed and requested police and district administration of the growing incidences of kidnappings and forced conversions of their girls, extortion and kidnappings for ransom, but to no avail.

He also lamented on the Hindu parliamentarians saying they are not representatives of the Hindu people but have been imposed by the political parties on their will.

After events started unfolding in quick succession with Interior Minister of Pakistan putting bar on Hindus crossing the border which too resulted in the large hue and cry from civil society. The President of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari constituted a two member committee comprising of Senator Mola Bux Chandio and Senator Hari Ram to look into the matter and submit initial report to him.

Eashwar Lal says "we have put some demands in front of them, including our one-on-one meeting with the President". Our major demand is security and safety of our girls and women, maintains Mr. Lal.

Pakistan Young Hindu Panchayat Convener, Dr. Dileep Daultani notes that Sukker and Larkana Divisions in Sindh are increasingly becoming religiously intolerant for the minority communities especially for Hindus.

"Hindus are quitting their motherland because their families, businesses and lands are no more secure here", he says. "70 per cent of the Hindus going to India are going to settle there, others who have other options are also thinking to settle in Europe and America", observers Daultani. He suspects that the conspiracy has been hatched by expelling Hindus from Sindh and turn the local people into minority in the face of changing demographic paradigms of Sindh in particular.

He says, "Committees are no solution to the problems of Hindu community", nevertheless, we have presented them with our demands including setting up minority desk at district level in police and district administration for the redressal of the complaints of minorities, particularly Hindu community".

Some people have claims that the migration of Hindu community to India and other cities of Sindh like Karachi started in the wake abduction of Hindu girl (Rinkle Kumari) from Ghotki district of Sindh who converted to Islam at the behest of local Pakistan Peoples Party MNA and his cronies. The case was taken up at the highest level by the Supreme Court of Pakistan through a *Suo Moto*. Rinkle Kumari in the end decided in favor of her Muslim husband. Rinkle's relatives however alleged that she was forced to decide in favor of her husband. Supreme Court's *suo moto* too could not yield any dividends for the Hindu community.

Raj Kumar, uncle of Rinkle Kumari, says that Hindu community had submitted to the kidnapping for ransom practices against them; however, kidnappings of girls followed by forced conversions alarmed his community whose fear started increasing with every passing day.

"Our people have started shifting to India and elsewhere after Rinkle's incident", says Raj kumar.

Raj's contention is also substantiated by other activists too. Migration of Hindu Community to India and other cities of Sindh is direct offshoot of the neglect this community has been going through for many years, notes M. Parkash, Chairman Pakistan Minority Commission. "The impetus to this trend was provided by Rinkle's case", he says.

Civil society activists believe, government and its institutions have allowed current situation to worsen because of its willful neglect. Muhammad Parial Maree, human rights activist from Shikarpur says government has failed in ensuring the good governance in the province. "Honest and neutral police officers and district administration is extremely

necessary for the protection of the rights of the citizens including minorities", he observes.

Committees and meetings have never resulted in producing tangible results in Pakistan. It is important that both Sindh government as well as the Federal government take steps ensuring the life, religion, dignity and property of minorities in general and Hindus in particular. The introduction of minority desk at district level with close liaison with police and district administration may help in taking timely and appropriate measures to stop activities of kidnapping, conversion and extortion. Both the government must ensure that article 25 of Pakistan's Constitution is implemented in its spirit which mandates the state to treat all the citizens equally without difference of religion, caste or creed.

'Excavation of Ahmadi grave could spark clash'

Express Tribune (15.06.2012) - Claiming of constant discrimination and threats to their lives, the Ahmadiyya community in Faisalabad has one more thing to worry about: resting in peace.

The Ahmadiyya community has called upon government functionaries as well as police authorities to help avert a possible clash which could erupt if the grave of an Ahmadi is excavated from a Muslim cemetery in the jurisdiction of the Jaranwala police station.

In this regard, Secretary Amoor-e-Aama, Jamaat Ahmadiyya Faisalabad, Syed Mahmood Ahmad Shah has written two letters to the Punjab home secretary and top police officials, expressing fears that if immediate steps are not taken to resolve the issue many Ahmadis "may lose their lives at the hands of banned outfits that are constantly hurling threats".

He pointed out that for the last many years, the Ahmadiyya community has been living in peace and harmony and the communities (Muslim and Ahmadiyya) have a common graveyard in Jaranwala.

He further said that one member of their community, Nazeer Ahmad, who died on May 11, 2012, was buried in the graveyard, with the consent of all the villagers. However, he added, soon enough some maulvis from out of town started protesting against the burial and began a hate campaign against Ahmadis.

"The locals facilitated the funeral prayer and permitted the burial as they are not perverse and deviant like the maulvis, who are from out of town. They are trying to convince people to dig out the graves of Ahmadis saying they are non-Muslim infidels," Shah said.

The secretary warned that if a single grave of an Ahmadi is desecrated, it would result in "serious consequences".

He appealed to government functionaries and police authorities to discourage the maulvis taking any such step.

"We have been targeted and victimised mercilessly but there has been no sympathetic consideration for this community," Shah said.

Meanwhile, SP Jaranwala Division, Shah Nawaz told *The Express Tribune* that the issue had been resolved following negotiations with all the stakeholders including the Ahmadiyya community.

"It has been made clear to the Ahmadiyya community that they will not bury their community members in a graveyard which is also a Muslim graveyard," he said

The police official further said that efforts are being made for the allocation of state land for burials of Ahmadis separately in a newly developed graveyard.

"Special police forces have also been constituted which will patrol in the area around the clock so as to avert any untoward incident," the SP added.

Hindu girl tells Supreme Court she would rather die than convert to Islam

By Jibran Khan

AsiaNews (28.03.2012) - "In Pakistan there is justice only for Muslims, justice is denied Hindus. Kill me here, now, in court. But do not send me back to the Darul-Aman [Koranic school] ... kill me". This is the desperate, heartbreaking outburst of Rinkel Kumari, a Hindu girl aged 19, who has entrusted her heartfelt appeal to the judges of the Supreme Court in Islamabad. Her story is similar to that of many other young women and girls belonging to religious minorities - Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Ahmadis - kidnapped by extremist groups or individuals, most of the time lords or local mafia, which convert them by force and then marry them . And that is what the girl said on 26 March, before the judges of the capital's court.

The drama of Rinkel Kumari, a student of Mirpur Mathelo, a small village in the province of Sindh, began the evening of February 24: A handful of men seized her and delivered her a few hours later into the hands of a wealthy Muslim scholar, the man then called her parents, warning them that their daughter "wants to convert to Islam."

Nand Lal, the girl's father, a teacher of an elementary school, accused Naveed Shah, an influential Muslim, of kidnapping his daughter. The man has the "political cover" provided by Mian Mittho, an elected National Assembly Member, suspected of aiding and abetting. After identifying the perpetrators of the kidnapping of his daughter, he was forced to leave the area of origin to escape the threats of people affiliated with the local mafia. The father found refuge and welcome in Gurdwara in Lahore, in Punjab province, with the rest of his family.

As often happens in these cases, even the judiciary is complicit: a local judge ordered that the girl should be given to the Muslims, because her conversion is "the result of a spontaneous decision" and also stated the marriage was above board. A claim that was repeated on February 27, at the hearing before the court, after which the girl was "renamed" Faryal Shah.

However, the story of Rinkel is not an isolated case: every month between 25 and 30 young people suffer similar abuses, for a yearly total of about 300 conversions and forced marriages. Hindu girls - but also Christian - who are torn from their family and delivered into the hands of their husbands / torturers.

On March 26, she appeared before the judges of the Supreme Court in Islamabad, while the Hindu community waited with bated breath for the girl's statements in court. To avoid pressure, the presiding judge ordered the courtroom cleared and - later - the dramatic testimony was relayed: in Pakistan, "there is no" justice, "kill me here but do not send me back" to the kidnappers.

Speaking to AsiaNews Fr. Anwar Patras, the Diocese of Rawalpindi, condemned "with force" the kidnapping and forced conversion. "The Hindus in Sindh - adds the priest - live a hard life. The reality is getting harder for them, they are forced to migrate because the state is unable to protect them and their property.

Pakistani Muslims rape girl, beat relatives for prosecuting

Aunt of 13-year-old victim loses twins to miscarriage after beating

By Murad Khan

Compass Direct News (21.05.2012) – A band of Muslims this month severely beat a pregnant Christian woman in Punjab's Narowal district – causing her to lose female twins to miscarriage – in an effort pressure her family into dropping charges of raping her 13-year-old niece, the woman's husband said.

Asher Masih of Dhamala village told Compass by phone that the men attacked his home on May 8.

"All three male members of our family, including my father, brother and myself, were out for work when Irfan Safdar and his accomplices trespassed into our house and started beating up my mother, sister-in-law and my wife, who was in her fifth month of pregnancy, mercilessly," he said.

Masih's elderly mother said she pleaded for the attackers to spare his wife, but they did not listen.

"They murdered our children, they raped our daughter," she said. "We have nothing left with us."

In a country where Muslim criminals believe police and courts will give little credence to the complaints of Christians, the family accuses three Muslims of gang-raping the girl at an outhouse on March 29.

"She had gone to a nearby field to use the toilet when she was forcibly taken away by three men later identified as Irfan Safdar and Shahid. Their third accomplice remains unidentified as yet," Masih said. "At first we thought that she might have stopped at some neighbor's house, but when she did not return after a long time, we set out to look for her."

He said a villager informed the family that he had seen Safdar and two others taking the girl to an outhouse. The family rushed to the site, but Safdar and his accomplices fled, Masih said.

"We found [name withheld] inside the outhouse, raped and badly injured," he said.

Masih said the family tried to register a First Information Report (FIR) with local police, but officers turned a deaf ear, as Safdar is the son of former police inspector Safdar Bajwa.

"They also refused to register [the victim's] statement under Section 164, which is mandatory in such cases," he said.

Police refused to file their complaint for more than a week, during which time the suspects repeatedly threatened the family, he said.

"They told us we were poor and weak and could not face them no matter how much we tried," Masih said. "There are about four or five Christian families in the overwhelmingly Muslim village, but almost everyone is fed up with the Bajwa family because of their criminal activities."

Safdar Bajwa first denied that his son was involved in the case, but when several Muslim villagers started visiting the police station with the victim's family, the accused surrendered a servant identified as Shahid to police, saying he had raped the girl, Masih said.

"The police tried to give a clean sheet to Irfan in the initial investigation, because of his father's influence, but then registered FIR No. 145/12 under Section 376 against three men, including Irfan, when the villagers insisted," he said, adding that police still did not arrest Safdar. "In April, Irfan and his accomplices illegally grabbed a piece of land owned by us. They did this to pressure us into giving up the case, but we stood our ground. We are poor, but we chose not to compromise on our honor."

Masih said the Muslim family used various tactics to compel the victim's family to drop the charges, and when all efforts failed, they attacked their house.

After neighbors informed the men at work of the attack, they took the injured women to a hospital.

"The doctors tried to save the babies, but Nosheen had a miscarriage because of the severe injuries inflicted by the attackers," he said, adding that his wife was still in a state of shock and grief.

Masih said that the family has registered case No. 184/12 against Irfan Safdar and nine others, but the suspects managed to get pre-arrest bails with the help of police.

"Their interim bails end on May 22, and we know they will be able to influence their way out of this case as well," he said. "There is no justice for the poor and helpless in Pakistan, especially if you belong to a minority community."

Thus far, he added, they have received no assistance from any government or Christian organization.

"We cannot leave the village, because we don't have any other place or means to go," he said. "The villagers are giving moral support to us, but we need help in facing this situation. In villages, it is the police that matter, and in this case, the entire police machinery is working against us."

Saddar Station House Officer Sohail Tariq was unavailable for comment.

Life sentences for 'blasphemy' overturned

Prosecutors find no evidence for charges against Christian couple

By Murad Khan

Compass Direct News (18.05.2012) – A court acquitted a Christian couple of “blasphemy” charges yesterday, overturning their life sentences, their lawyer said.

Chaudhry Naeem Shakir told Compass that Justice Mazhar Ali Akbar Naqvi of the Lahore High Court accepted the couple’s appeal because prosecutors failed to prove allegations that 32-year-old Munir Masih and his wife Ruqayya defiled the Quran or insulted Muhammad on Dec. 8, 2008.

The allegations by Muhammad Nawaz in Mustafabad, Kasur district, came under sections 295-B and 295-C respectively of Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, which are routinely employed to exact revenge on Christians over personal disputes; in this case, the Christian couple’s children had fought with the family of Muhammad Yousaf, who directed his driver, Nawaz, to file the blasphemy charges.

Shakir said that the First Information Report (FIR) indicated Nawaz initially accused Ruqayya Masih of using the Quran for exorcism. He accused her of touching the Quran without ablution and said that her husband was equally culpable since he remained a silent spectator. The complainant also claimed that the couple insulted Muhammad.

A trial court had exonerated them from charges of blasphemy against Muhammad in 2010 but sentenced them to life imprisonment (25 years in Pakistan) for allegedly defiling the Quran. The couple then filed an appeal in the Lahore High Court pleading not guilty.

“During the trial, not a single witness spoke against the couple regarding the allegations of blasphemy,” Shakir said. “Therefore, [Kasur Additional Session] Judge Muhammad Ajmal Hussain on March 2, 2010 acquitted the couple in 295-C but awarded them life imprisonment under Section 295-B.”

During the course of hearings, Shakir asserted that Yousaf, along with his brother Muhammad Ilyas, implicated the couple through their driver, Nawaz, who filed the FIR against the couple. Shakir told the court that the motive behind this move was a fight between the children of the Christian couple and Yousaf’s family.

When the prosecutor argued that no one could touch the Quran without ablution, Shakir said, “Justice Naqvi told the prosecutor that no one bothers to do that before reading the Quran or the Bible in libraries around the world.”

He said that the Lahore High Court had released Munir Masih on bail because the charges against him were weak.

“Witnesses had claimed that Munir was sitting outside his home when Ruqayya was allegedly defiling the Quran,” he said, adding that the Christian woman has been languishing in Sahiwal Jail and will not be freed until Monday (May 21). The couple has four daughters and two sons.

Shakir said that Mustafabad police had named eight witnesses in the FIR, of whom three were named as eyewitnesses, while the others were classified as “recovery witnesses” – those supposedly present when police recovered the Quran from the couple’s house.

"Of the five 'recovery witnesses,' two completely denied being at the alleged crime scene," Shakir said. "One told the court that he had reached the place after the police had made the recovery, while the other said that he had testified under duress, making the case quite clear."

The couple's attorney said that Ruqayya Masih had admitted keeping the Quran in her house.

"She told me that the Quran was given to her by a Muslim neighbor named Muhammad Faisal, and she had kept it safely with her, although she did not say why," he said, adding that police had informed the court that they had found the Quran wrapped in a piece of cloth and placed in a cupboard.

Hindus accuse Muslims of kidnapping teens as wives

NY Daily News (23.04.2012) – Rachna Kumari, 16, was shopping for dresses in this city's dust-choked bazaar when it happened.

The man who her family says abducted her was not a street thug. He was a police officer. Nor was he a stranger. Rachna's family knew and trusted him. He guarded the Hindu temple run by her father, an important duty in a society where Hindus are often terrorized by Muslim extremists, and he had helped Rachna cram for her ninth-grade final exams.

After she disappeared from the market, he did not demand a ransom. According to her family, he had an entirely different purpose: to force her to convert to Islam and marry him.

In a country where Hindu-dominated India is widely reviled as Enemy No. 1, Pakistan's Hindu community endures extortion, disenfranchisement and other forms of discrimination.

These days, however, Hindus are fixated on a surge of kidnappings of teenage girls by young Muslim men who force them to convert and wed. Pakistani human rights activists report as many as 25 cases a month.

Most occur in the northern districts of Sindh province, on the border with India and home to most of Pakistan's 2.5 million Hindus. The Hindu community is shrinking as families flee the area, which is run largely by Muslim feudal chiefs who own vast tracts of farmland and wield wide influence over politics, law enforcement and the courts.

Hindus say the forcible conversions follow the same script: The victim, abducted by a young man related to or working for a feudal boss, is taken to a mosque where clerics, along with the prospective groom's family, threaten to harm her and her relatives if she resists.

Almost always, the girl complies, and not long afterward, she is brought to a local court, where a judge, usually a Muslim, rubber-stamps the conversion and marriage, according to Hindu community members who have attended such hearings.

Often the young Muslim man is accompanied by backers armed with rifles. Few members of the girl's family are allowed to appear, and the victim, seeing no way out, signs papers affirming her conversion and marriage.

"In court, usually it's just four or five members of the girl's family against hundreds of armed people for the boy," says B.H. Khurana, a doctor in Jacobabad and a Hindu community leader. "In such a situation when we are unarmed and outnumbered, how can we fight our case in court?"

Prominent Pakistani Muslims have joined Hindu leaders in calling attention to the problem.

President Asif Ali Zardari's sister, lawmaker Azra Fazal Pechuho, told parliament last month that a growing number of Hindu girls are being abducted and held at madrasas, or Islamic religious schools, where they are forcibly converted. She and other lawmakers have called for legislation to prohibit the practice.

The issue was thrust into the spotlight by the case of Rinkle Kumari, a 17-year-old Hindu girl from the town of Mirpur Mathelo in the southern province of Sindh. The case was one of three that recently went before Pakistan's Supreme Court.

Kumari's parents, who are not related to Rachna's family, allege that five men broke into their house in late February, subdued Rinkle with a chloroform-soaked cloth and took her away. The parents say the girl was forced to convert to Islam and marry Naveed Shah, a neighbor.

Shah contends Rinkle acted willingly.

"She was not forced at all," said Shah's lawyer, Malik Qamar Afzal. "She embraced Islam freely, and afterward agreed to marry."

The day after the alleged abduction and conversion, Rinkle was allowed to meet with her mother at a district court.

"She told me, 'I have been kidnapped and I want to go with you,'" recalled her mother, Sulchani Kumari. "She was sobbing as she told me, 'For God's sake, take me away from that hell.'"

Hindu community leaders acknowledge that in some cases, Hindu girls convert and marry Muslim men willingly. Determining which cases involve coercion has been difficult for authorities.

Asha Kumari, a 16-year-old Hindu girl not related to Rinkle or Rachna, disappeared March 3 from a beauty parlor in Jacobabad where she was taking a beautician's course, according to her brother, Vinod Kumar, 22.

Neither her family nor police could find her until April 13, when she appeared before the Supreme Court, accompanied by her new husband, Bashir Lashari.

Like Rinkle, she told the court she had willingly married and embraced Islam. As in Rinkle's case, the conversion took place at a Sufi Muslim shrine run by the brother of Mian Abdul Haq, a Muslim lawmaker with the ruling Pakistan People's Party and a wealthy landowner in northern Sindh.

"This is the way it always happens," said Vinod Kumar. "These girls are kidnapped, and then later they show up in court and say they have converted."

Hindu community leaders took the cases of Rinkle and Asha and that of a third Hindu woman all the way to the Supreme Court.

On Wednesday, the court ruled that the three could choose whether to stay with their new husbands or return to their parents. All three decided to stay.

At the heart of the problem, Hindu community leaders say, is a lack of will on the part of police and courts.

"When someone gets kidnapped, Hindus lodge kidnapping charges, but authorities don't respond," said Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, a leader of the Pakistan Hindu Council. "After 20 days, the kidnapper and his people pressure the girl and say, 'If you don't accept Islam and give wrong answers in court, you know what will happen.' That's coercion." In the case of Rachna Kumari, police themselves stand accused.

Pakistani authorities have periodically assigned police officers to Hindu temples as a precaution since the 1992 demolition of a mosque in Ayodhya, India, triggered unrest between Indian Hindus and Muslims.

Barkat Talani, an officer at the Jacobabad temple run by Rachna's father, began helping her with her studies as a favor to the family.

After she was abducted in August, Talani was arrested and suspended from his job. At a court hearing a month later, Rachna appeared in a black burka, surrounded by about 100 of Talani's supporters, many of them armed, said the girl's uncle, Rakesh Kumar. The judge accepted a statement written by Rachna that indicated she had willingly converted and married. Her family contends the document was drafted by Talani's lawyer.

A few weeks later, while out shopping with her new husband's female relatives, Rachna appeared at her grandmother's door and asked for a drink of water.

"I asked her, 'Why did you leave us?'" the grandmother, Maharajni Andhrabai, recalled. "She said, 'I was forced to.' She was weeping."

Later, Talani reported that Rachna had disappeared. Talani and her family both say they do not know where she is.

Talani is back at work, according to Jacobabad's police chief, Jam Zafrullah Dharejo, who said the allegations against the officer were unfounded.

Now the Kumari family has a singular focus: safeguarding Rachna's 13-year-old sister, Bharti. They've withdrawn her from school and forbidden her to set foot in the bazaar. "We're so sad about what happened to Rachna," the grandmother said, "but we're also worried about what else could happen."

Christian acquitted of 'blasphemy' charge in Pakistan

Prosecutor unable to produce any evidence despite clamoring of Muslim mobs.

By Murad Khan

Compass Direct News (17.04.2012) – A Pakistani Christian falsely charged with "blasphemy" after rescuing his 8-year-old nephew from a beating at the hands of Muslim boys has been cleared of the charge.

Dildar Masih, a 27-year-old father of two young children, was acquitted on March 26 after prosecutors failed to produce any evidence against him, he said.

"I was produced in court three times during the case proceedings, but not one accuser ever turned up at the hearings," Masih told Compass by phone. "You cannot imagine my joy when the prison officials told me that I had been acquitted by the court. I had not been taken to the hearing that day; only my lawyer, Javed Raza, and father were present in the courtroom."

His nephew, Ihtesham (also known as Sunny), had gone out to fetch ice when Muslim boys from a nearby *madrassa* (religious school) beat him for refusing to convert to Islam in village No. 68 AR Farmwala, in Khanewal district's Mian Channu area in Punjab Province, on June 10, 2011.

Seeing the attack from a distance, Masih shouted and rushed to the scene, rescued his nephew and then went to his work as a painter. Soon after the incident, a Muslim mob of about 55 led by village prayer leader Qari Hasnain besieged Masih's house and ordered his father, Yousaf Masih, to hand over "the blasphemer" to them.

Yousaf Masih said that Hasnain claimed to have heard Dildar Masih "abusing Islamic holy words" as he was standing in the entrance of his mosque near the site of the incident. Hasnain later telephoned clerics in neighboring villages, and they called on all Muslims to "come out for the defense of Islam" after Friday prayers.

Unaware of the declarations emanating from the mosque, Dildar Masih had no idea why the Islamic throng arrived at the house he was painting and "pounced on him like tigers," his elderly father told Compass.

Police registered a blasphemy case against Dildar Masih, No. 211/11 under Section 298 of the Pakistan Penal Code and Section 16 of the Maintenance of Public Order, later that night after a crowd of about 2,500 Muslims gathered outside the police station and demanded officers hand him over to them.

He told Compass that he could scarcely believe his ears when he learned that he had been acquitted and would be released that same day. He said that there had been instances when Muslim prisoners and junior jail officials at the Multan Central Jail had tried to vent their anger at him, "but some prisoner or another would intervene in the situation and tell them that I was not guilty of blasphemy and thus saved me from being beaten up."

Masih said that during his imprisonment, he stood by his faith that Jesus would free him from the false charge and that he would be able to return to his family.

"I prayed a lot ... This was the only other thing I did in prison besides having food and sleeping," he said. "I kept on telling God that I had complete faith in Him and would wait for the day when He would set me free."

After being released from jail – so full of joy that he forgot several of his belongings in his hurry to leave – Masih joined his family in a village where the entire clan has relocated after the incident.

"I haven't found work as yet, but I'm sure God will provide a living for me very soon," he said. "It's so good to be back among my two children and wife ... And yes, I'm much more closer to God now."

He said he's witnessed the hand of the Almighty at work.

"About 13 people are currently imprisoned in Multan Central Jail under blasphemy charges," he said. "I was the only Christian, and probably the only one to have been able to return home in less than a year."

Pakistani woman accused of 'Blasphemy' illegally held in jail

Authorities fail to file charge sheet against young mother of 6-month-old

By Murad Khan

Compass Direct New (10.04.2012) – The mother of a 6-month-old girl has been wrongly jailed for more than a month, as Pakistani authorities have failed to file a charge sheet within the mandatory 14-day period against the young Christian woman falsely accused of "blaspheming" the prophet of Islam, her attorney said.

Shamim Bibi, 26, of village Chak No. 170/7R Colony, in the Fort Abbas area of Bahawalpur district, was charged under Section 295-C of Pakistan's "blasphemy" statutes after neighbors accused her of uttering remarks against Muhammad. She was arrested on Feb. 28.

Speaking ill of Muhammad in Pakistan is punishable by life imprisonment or death under Pakistan's internationally condemned blasphemy laws.

"Shamim has been implicated in a completely baseless case," said her husband, Bashir Masih. "I was present with her at the time of the alleged incident ... nothing of the sort happened. The Muslims cooked up a false story, though it's still not clear who provoked them into leveling this accusation."

After visiting his wife in jail today, Bashir told Compass by phone that she was holding fast to her Christian faith and firmly believed that God would rescue her soon from the false charge.

"She is alright otherwise, but she especially misses her daughter," Masih said. "We are not sure when Shamim will be able to come back home, although our lawyer is quite hopeful of securing her release very soon."

One of the two witnesses named in the First Information Report (FIR), Abdul Qayyum, has already denied hearing anything from her that supports the charge.

"The police just did not listen to our pleas and went ahead and registered a case against my innocent wife," he said. "It's been over a month now, but the police haven't filed a charge sheet against her. Who will compensate for the agony that my wife and family are suffering for no fault of ours?"

Shamim Bib's lawyer, Mahboob A. Khan, told Compass that he had filed a bail application on March 17, but the court has not taken it up.

"The complainant party has changed their lawyer, and their new counsel filed his papers in court at today's [Tuesday] hearing," Khan said. "The bail application will now most likely be heard at the next hearing."

On the delay in completing the charge sheet, Khan said that police were supposed to register it within 14 days of filing the FIR under the Code of Criminal Procedure. Police say that they have forwarded the charge sheet to the prosecution department, but there has been nothing from them either, he said.

"The judicial process is painfully slow, and it's even slower in such sensitive matters," Khan said. "I just hope the judge realizes the gaps in the case, and even if he does not muster enough courage to quash the case, he should at least set her free on bail." Shamim Bibi's family had earlier told Compass that she had been accused because she had resisted pressure to convert to Islam four days before her arrest. Three relatives had become Muslims on Feb. 24 and urged her to do the same, and when she refused, neighbors on Feb. 27 accused her of making derogatory remarks – as yet unknown – about Muhammad (see www.compassdirect.org, "Pakistani Woman Charged with 'Blasphemy' for Refusing Islam," March 12).

Ansar Ali Shah, a local prayer leader in Chak 170/7R Colony, claimed that Shamim Bibi's neighbors, Hamad Ahmed Hashmi and Abdul Qayyum, told him and other Muslims that they had heard the Christian woman making derogatory remarks about Muhammad in her courtyard, according to the First Information Report (FIR No. 30/12) registered by the Khichiwala police station. But there is no indication in the FIR of what, exactly, Shamim Bibi was alleged to have said.

As word of the allegation spread, a large crowd of villagers besieged her house and demanded "severe punishment for the infidel," claiming she had hurt their religious sentiments, sources said.

Shahbaz Masih, her brother-in-law, told Compass that Qayyum told police that he wasn't even present in his house at the time of the alleged incident and had come to know about it from Hashmi, the other witness. Hashmi, a motorized-rickshaw driver, also was not present at his house at 3 p.m., the time of the alleged remark, Shahbaz Masih said, based on information gathered from Shamim Bibi's neighborhood.

Bahawalnagar Superintendent of Police Investigation Irfan Ullah has acknowledged that one of the two witnesses had admitted to not being present at the alleged "crime" scene at the time of the alleged remark.

New wave of well-off Pakistani women drawn to conservative Islam

By Jason Burke

The Guardian (09.04.2012) – All the women working in the information technology division of the Bank of Punjab's headquarters in the western Pakistani city of Lahore wear headscarves tightly wound around their cheeks and chin, framing their faces as they tap at their keyboards. A year or so ago not one covered their heads with the hijab.

"I was the first," says 28-year-old Shumaila, as she waited with some impatience in the city's iStore for her new £800 Apple MacBook to be loaded with the software she had ordered.

"I started reading the Qur'an properly and praying five times a day. No one made me wear the hijab. That would be impossible," she laughs brightly. "I showed the way to the other girls at work."

They are not alone. Though there are no statistics and most evidence is anecdotal, a new wave of interest in more conservative strands of Islam among wealthier and better educated women in Pakistan appears clear.

It is part of a broader cultural and religious shift seen in the country over decades but which observers say has accelerated in the past 10 years.

"The other girls who were working with us left." Shumaila said. "They found the new environment a bit unfriendly."

One indication of the trend is the growing proportion of women within the conservative religious political organisation Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). Syed Munawar Hassan, the leader of JI in Pakistan, said that women made up an increasing proportion of the organisation's 6 million members and 30,000 organisers. "Our women's wing is doing very well," he said. "They are some of our best organisers."

JI, like its counterparts elsewhere in the Islamic world, has traditionally recruited among the lower middle class, swollen in recent decades in Pakistan by rapid urbanisation and economic growth. But the new wave of devotion is now touching the elite in a new way. Al-Huda (The Guidance), an organisation set up in 1994 to spread a new and often rigorous piety among Pakistani women, has gained a foothold among the upper reaches of society.

The group, which critics accuse of encouraging intolerant strands of Islam influenced by those practised in Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, has grown from an initial single small centre in Islamabad, the Pakistani capital, to a presence in every city, and is expanding among the Pakistani diaspora abroad.

Members attend intensive courses in Qur'anic studies and Arabic and are directed to do social welfare work, too. Not all enjoy the experience of al-Huda, however.

"I found it very limiting and rigid. But it is very popular among women from very wealthy families that are quite conservative. Recently there are a lot of young women coming to a very traditional Islam. There is a deep desire for learning," said Maha Jehangir, a 30-year-old consultant and former al-Huda member.

Jehangir, who lives in a large house in one of the most exclusive parts of Islamabad, said questions posed by the events of the past decade were particularly important for young women.

"People who grew up within the war on terror are asking, what does it mean to be a Nato ally? Is India our worst enemy? We are bombarded by all this information and there is a deep need for answers. That leads to religious inquiry," Jehangir said.

Many found the answers in conservative strands of religious practice, she said.

Other influences that underpin the new piety among wealthy women include the experience of many Pakistanis who have spent time in the Gulf.

Amna, a 21-year-old business student whose father was a manager for a major firm in Saudi Arabia, said that it was wrong to think that women who were richer or more educated would inevitably be more secular.

"Everything we learn comes from the Qur'an. Maths, computers, banking – the Qur'an contains everything," said Amna, who wears a Saudi-style full veil covering all but her eyes even at the all-female college in Islamabad where she studies.

However, if there is a demand for more rigorous, literalist strands of Islamic practice among wealthy and educated women, there is also an interest in more tolerant varieties.

In Lahore, the al-Mawrid institute is attracting more and more "educated ladies, doctors, professors, housewives who do not know about Islam", says Kaukab Shehzad, a 43-year-old teacher.

The institute, in the wealthy suburb of Model Town, was set up three years ago but had to move after receiving threats from radical scholars, she said. "We read the Qur'an in detail but we discuss other religions too. We were attacked for saying that the niqab [Saudi-style veil] is not justified in the Qur'anic teachings and for arguing against their interpretation of the idea of jihad," she said.

Though solidarity with Muslim communities overseas is encouraged by many conservative practitioners, many of the new devout shun such a global vision and identity. Shumaila, the bank worker and Apple enthusiast, says she is not interested in events in the Middle East: "We've enough going on here."

Jahangir, the former al-Huda member in Islamabad, recently spent two years studying in a religious school of the Deobandi branch of Islam, also followed by the Taliban in Afghanistan. A graduate of both Massachusetts and London Universities, she too said that political activism was of little interest: "I don't try to make sense of the Taliban. I find [them] obscure and irrelevant. For me, [the Deobandi school of Islam] is far more of a route to spirituality than a political ideology."

Campaign "Stop violence in the name of religion"

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) wishes to forward an appeal from Citizens for Democracy (CFD). Citizens for Democracy (CFD) is an umbrella group of professional organizations, political parties, trade unions and individuals outraged by the consistent misuse and abuse of the 'blasphemy laws' and of religion in politics.

CFD (14.03.2012) / HRWF (14.03.2012) - The Father of the nation Muhammad Ali Jinnah told the nation in his speech to the Constituent Assembly on Aug 11, 1947, "You are free; you are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed --that has nothing to do with the business of the State." Sadly, this nation is today witnessing calls to demolish places of worships, killings and abduction in the name of religion, abductions and forced conversions (particularly of the Hindu community in Sindh) and a flood of hate mongering activities.

We urge you to intervene and stop the killing of Pakistan's religious communities, specifically target killings those belonging to the Sunni (Barelvi), Shia (including Hazara) and Ahmadi communities who are facing a virtual genocide simply for following their religious beliefs and practices.

The attacks on the 12 Rabiul Awal processions cities around Pakistan are evidence of the menace of bigotry and intolerance, as are the target killings of Shias in Kohistan, Parachinar and Mastaung and violence against Ahmadis. The government must act with all its might to put a stop to this. This needs to be done NOW.

The activities of the so-called Difa-e-Pakistan Council, a coalition comprising several 'religious parties' including some banned organizations whose views don't resonate with

the majority but are able to use their armed status and street power to attack others with impunity, need to be curtailed before it becomes the Destroy Pakistan Council.

1. We strongly condemn these threats of violence and urge the establishment of a code of ethics across the board that prohibits any religious or political party supporting those who victimize others.
2. The Government must ensure that the banned terrorist organizations are not able to operate and harm or threaten peaceful citizens.
3. The Government, both at the Federal and Provincial levels, must take immediate action against violence, threats and intimidation, especially those in the name of religion.
4. There is urgent need to institute a witness protection plan; the police must be empowered, enabled and de-politicized in order to act against those who violate basic human rights and engage in criminal acts in Pakistan.
5. The government must employ the full force of the law to ensure that no one attacks or threatens members of any community simply for following their religious beliefs and practices.

We hope that the government and all political parties will wake up to the growing evil of intolerance and bigotry that is fast turning into a monster and act up before it eats up the very foundations of our society.

Sincerely,

Pakistani woman charged with 'Blasphemy' for refusing Islam

Relatives who became Muslims try to force her to renounce Christian faith

By Murad Khan

Compass Direct News (12.03.2012) – A young mother has been falsely accused of “blaspheming” Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, because she rebuffed attempts by relatives who had converted to Islam to force her to renounce her Christian faith, family members said.

Police in Khichiwala, Bahawalnagar district, in Punjab Province, charged 26-year-old Shamim Bibi, mother of a 5-month-old girl and resident of the village Chak No. 170/7R Colony, in the Fort Abbas area, under Section 295-C of Pakistan’s “blasphemy” statutes after neighbors accused her of uttering remarks against Muhammad. She was arrested on Feb. 28.

Speaking ill of Muhammad in Pakistan is punishable by life imprisonment or death under Pakistan’s internationally condemned blasphemy laws.

The young woman’s brother, Ilyas Masih, and her brother-in-law, Shahbaz Masih, told Compass that she had been wrongly accused because she had resisted pressure to convert to Islam four days before her arrest.

“Nazeeran, sister of Shamim’s husband Bashir Masih, and her nephew Nadeem and niece Bella accepted Islam on Feb. 24 and called on her to do the same,” Masih said. “She refused, telling them that she was satisfied with Christianity and did not want to convert.”

He said the newly-converted Muslims persisted in trying to force her to convert, but she resisted.

"Shamim told them that she had complete faith in a living God, and that there was no reason for her to start 'worshipping graves,'" Masih said.

That remark was not the one deemed "blasphemous." Rather, on Feb. 27 her neighbors accused her of making derogatory remarks – as yet unknown – on a separate occasion about Muhammad while in her courtyard.

Ansar Ali Shah, a local prayer leader in Chak 170/7R Colony, claimed that Shamim Bibi's neighbors, Hamad Ahmed Hashmi and Abdul Qayyum, told him and other Muslims that they had heard the Christian woman making derogatory remarks about Muhammad in her courtyard, according to the First Information Report (FIR No. 30/12) registered by the Khichiwala police station. But there is no indication in the FIR of what, exactly, Shamim Bibi was alleged to have said.

As word of the allegation spread, a large crowd of villagers besieged her house and demanded "severe punishment for the infidel," claiming she had hurt their religious sentiments, sources said.

Shahbaz Masih, her brother-in-law, told Compass that Qayyum, one of the two men named in the FIR as witnesses, has denied hearing anything from Shamim Bibi that supports the charge.

"Qayyum told police that he wasn't even present in his house at the time of the alleged incident and had come to know about it from Hamad, the other witness," Shahbaz Masih said.

Hamad Ahmed Hashmi, a motorized-rickshaw driver, also was not present at his house at 3 p.m., the time of the alleged remark, Shahbaz Masih said, based on information gathered from Shamim Bibi's neighborhood.

"Hamad transports schoolchildren and could not have been in his house at the time of the incident, as it was just after school closing hours," he said.

Bahawalnagar Superintendent of Police Investigation Irfan Ullah acknowledged that one of the two witnesses had admitted to not being present at the alleged "crime" scene at the time of the alleged remark.

"Qayyum told us that he hadn't witnessed the incident and his name had been included in the FIR by the locals, but still that does not prove that Shamim did not commit blasphemy," Ullah told Compass by phone. "The other witness is standing by his claim, and she has produced nothing so far which can prove her innocence."

He vehemently denied that police had caved in to pressure from local Muslims and had registered a case in undue haste.

"I visited the village twice, and so far nothing has come up that suggests that the people have accused Shamim wrongly," Ullah said. "We registered a case against her on the directions of the district police officer."

Bahawalnagar District Police Officer Salman Ali Khan could not be reached for comment.

Shamim Bibi's family and her infant daughter, meantime, may have to wait for a long time for her return. While no one has been executed for blasphemy in Pakistan, most are freed on appeal after suffering for years under appalling prison conditions.

Vigilantes have killed at least 10 people accused of blasphemy, rights groups estimate.

Section 295-C of Pakistan's blasphemy law states: "Whoever by words, either spoken or written or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine."

Two Christian hospital workers abducted in Karachi

Police do not rule out Islamic extremists as suspects

By Murad Khan

Compass Direct News (07.03.2012) – Authorities do not know who abducted two Christian hospital employees in Karachi last week, but police sources said they suspected the kidnappers had links with banned terrorist organizations.

There is a strong possibility that Islamic extremists took the two workers of South Korea-based Good Samaritan Hospital, Issac Samson and Indrias Javaid, to Pakistan's tribal areas after kidnapping them on Thursday (March 1), the sources said.

"Such cases are on the rise, as banned Islamist groups and other criminal gangs are turning to kidnappings for ransom in order to survive and procure weapons and ammunition, but at the same time one cannot rule out the possibility of a targeted elimination of foreign and local NGO [Non-Governmental Organization] workers," a senior investigator for the Karachi police told Compass.

He said that most radical groups believed that Christian NGOs were involved in evangelizing "under the guise of charity" and have been targeted for that reason.

Samson and Javaid, along with a worker identified only as Austin and a driver identified only as Nasir, were headed to the Good Samaritan Hospital in Karachi's Orangi area when their hospital van was intercepted by four "fair-skinned" suspects in a car in the Islam Chowk neighborhood.

According to witnesses, the kidnappers asked the occupants of the van to identify whether they were Korean or not. The terrified aid workers informed them that they were Pakistanis, but the abductors dragged Samson and Javaid from the van and forced them to get into their car.

Nasir told police that the kidnappers, in a car that appeared to be jam-packed, said they would take the "pant-shirt guys" – those wearing Western clothing suggestive of office workers – and left the other two, who were wearing traditional Pakistani clothes.

Saul Ashraf, brother of the 42-year-old Javaid, said his abducted brother had two small daughters, 5 and 7. Associated with the hospital since 1992, Javaid has been working as its general manager.

"My brother never shared any security threat with us," Ashraf said. "This incident has shocked us. The police say that he might have been kidnapped for ransom, but we haven't received any demand for money so far."

He said that the Sindh Province government had assured them that steps were being taken to ensure the Christians' safe recovery, "but so far nothing concrete has come up."

"I request the kidnappers to let him go," Ashraf said. "My brother has two little daughters, and they should have mercy on them."

Younus Sadiq, father of the 26-year-old Samson, who worked for the finance department of the hospital, recalled how the young man left home for the hospital in the morning.

"We came to know through a news bulletin that he was kidnapped," Sadiq said.

He has been working for the charity hospital for the past three years. It is run and supported by South Korea-based Agape Medical Service since 1991. Six Koreans work at the hospital and reside in a nearby housing compound, all of them in the country temporarily.

A Korean worker who requested anonymity told Compass that the foreigners did not venture out unnecessarily. Another Korean worker said the hospital staff is Christian, but that 99 percent of its patients are Muslims.

"I don't know what irked the kidnappers," the worker said.

Three months ago, unidentified men fired on a Korean doctor in Karachi's Banaras area. According to the staffers, he is currently undergoing treatment in his home country.

Police are conducting interrogations in their search for leads on the kidnappers' identities.

Sabir Khan, station house officer of the Pakistan Bazar police station, told Compass that two witnesses said the kidnappers had first asked about the Christians' nationalities and then took away the two men.

"We cannot say that they were Taliban or members of any other banned Islamist organization," Khan said. "We are investigating the incident from all angles and will soon be able to trace the kidnappers."

He added that police were questioning people with possible links to the kidnappers, and "good news can be expected anytime soon."

Pakistani Muslims employ 'blasphemy' threat in land grab

Attempt fails as influential Islamic family intervenes on behalf of Christians

By Murad Khan

Compass Direct News (27.02.12) – Tensions are still high in a village near here following Muslims' attempt to seize land from a Christian family by threatening to accuse them of "blasphemy."

What began on Feb. 19 as a quarrel over a pigeon between Christian and Muslim youths at Nawa Pind Sabu Mohal village, in Sialkot's Pasroor area in northeast Punjab Province, grew into an occasion to jail some Christians in the overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim country, the Christians said.

Gulshan Masih, 20, told Compass that his younger brother, Saif Masih, 18, had quarreled with a young Muslim over a pigeon that led to about a half dozen boys from each group charging into a fistfight and later pelting each other with stones. With the Muslims throwing bricks and stones from inside a mosque at the young Christian men's homes, the skirmish ended when an elderly female relative of the Christians was wounded in their courtyard, Gulshan Masih said.

A few hours later, police officers arrived and took his father, 55-year-old Bashir Masih, 55, and 50-year-old uncle, Pervaiz Masih, into custody.

"The Muslims had accused us of desecrating the mosque by throwing stones at it," Gulshan Masih said. "My father and uncle were not even involved in the fight, yet they were taken into custody on false charges."

Muslim villagers have tried to drive Christians from the village on similarly petty pretexts, he said.

"We own land and cattle, and this may be one of the reasons why the Muslims keep on picking fights with us over minor issues," Masih said, recalling how relatives Saleem and Rasheed Masih were arrested on a false blasphemy charge in 1999 after a quarrel stemming from a Muslim ice cream vendor refusing to serve Saleem Masih from the same bowl used by Muslims. Rasheed Masih was not even present at the scene of the quarrel, Gulshan Masih said, but was also charged.

Their accusers had carried a grudge again them after having lost a civil land dispute. The brothers were convicted of blasphemy by a lower court, but the Lahore High Court freed them on March 19, 2003.

Hidden Motive

As soon as word spread in Sialkot that the Christian youths had "desecrated the mosque," Muslims from nearby villages gathered at a police station to pressure officers into registering a false case against Bashir and Pervaiz Masih under Pakistan's internationally condemned laws against blaspheming Islam, its prophet or the Quran.

Two days later, Tuesday (Feb. 21), police took into custody eight more Christians – Gulhan Masih, his cousin Amir Masih, Mehmood Masih, Irshad Masih, Kashif Masih, Qamar Masih, Khuram Masih and Akmal Masih – in order to increase pressure on the Christians, according to Napoleon Qayyum, a Christian rights activist. He said it was evident that the Muslims were trying to seize a 1.5-kanal (one kanal is one-eighth of an acre) plot of land owned by Bashir Masih, as they demanded that he surrender it as a condition for the release of the jailed Christians.

Bashir's land is located near a mosque run by one Hafiz Ishfaq, who is also a member of the militant Islamist group, the Sunni Tehreek, Qayyum said.

Police released Bashir and Pervaiz Masih and the other eight Christians on Wednesday evening (Feb. 22) with a warning that they would be charged with blasphemy if they did not meet the conditions set the previous day by a "reconciliation committee" comprising the area's notable Muslim leaders, Qayyum said – though in fact an influential family had argued successfully against imposing the condition on the Christians.

Muhammad Riaz Dar, the police inspector in-charge of the area, told Compass that the matter had been "amicably resolved" by the two parties. He declined to comment on the illegal detention.

Qayyum said the chain of events was clear.

"Look at how conveniently they threatened the Christians with involving them in a fake blasphemy case and were about to acquire the land without even paying a penny," he said.

The intervention of the influential Muslim family on behalf of the Christians persuaded Hafiz Ishaq and others against trying to seize their land, Gulshan Masih said. Thus far the Muslims have backed off from that demand, but the village was still volatile, he said.

The other demand imposed by the "reconciliation committee" was that Pervaiz Masih's son, Amir, not enter the village.

The Muslims suspect that Amir Masih had an affair with a local Muslim girl and took this opportunity to ban him from the village, said Qayyum.

He criticized police for playing into the hands of the Muslims.

"The police kept Bashir and Pervaiz in illegal custody for three days while eight others were detained for a day without any justification," he said. "The police did not bother to take action against the Muslims involved in the fight. No Muslim was arrested, and no notice was taken of the injuries suffered by the Christians."

Islamic extremists attack Christian community, two faithful injured

AsiaNews (23.02.2012) - A dozen armed Muslims stormed the Grace Ministry Church in Faisalabad, seriously wounding two Christians. Sajid Masih was hit by bullets and is in critical condition in hospital, the man risks having his amputated arm. Another member of the Protestant community, Boota Masih, was pushed from the roof - a height of about six meters - after being struck repeatedly with a rifle butt. The extremist raid was sparked by charges that church was trying to evangelize Muslims in an attempt to convert them to Christianity. The community several times in the past has been the subject of assault and the pastor and his family the subject of death threats.

Sources of Pakistan Christian Post reported that Sajid (pictured) and Boota were transported to hospital for a delicate operation, which lasted over four hours. Doctors have removed a bullet from Sajid's arm, but his condition remains serious and they may decide to amputate the arm that is at risk of gangrene. The bullet pierced the arm and is lodged in his rib.

The attack took place at Grace Ministry Church yesterday and the Christian community is still in shock. Meanwhile, the police, instead of pursuing the perpetrators of violence, have opened an investigation against the Rev. Altaf Khan - pastor of the community - and 20 other faithful. The agents have already arrested the driver Pervaiz Masih, another Christian faithful called Nazish Nadeem, along with two guards, security officers, Rafiq Masih and Shahzad.

The Protestant church was founded in 1987 and has recently undergone intense pressure attacks, and allegations of proselytizing. Over the past two months, says Rev. Khan, "I and my family have received death threats from extremists and terrorists." The charge of proselytism was made by the only Muslim family, who lives in the street home to the Grace Ministry Church Faisalabad. "Some Christian groups and Muslims - said the rev. Khan -jealous of our ministry have financed and supported terrorist groups in their attacks."

A letter from Grace Ministry Church in Faisalabad

HRWF (21.02.2012) - www.hrwf.net - Through one of its correspondents, Human Rights Without Frontiers has received a letter from the Grace Ministry Church in Faisalabad.

Dear Ministry Prayer Partners,

I am writing this with utter shock and sadness that our family was under attack from the enemies of our ministry.

Since last two months I and my family members were receiving life threatening calls from the extremists and unknown terrorists who wanted us to stop our evangelistic activities.

Some local Christians and Muslims who were jealous of our growing ministry were also lending these terrorist groups financial support.

On the eve of 18th February, 2012 around 5:00 p.m. around 15 to 20 armed men forcefully broke in and took over our ministry house [just in front of my residential house] where some widows and orphans were living.

Our Church security guards were beaten and assaulted. I was at home with my wife and son Arman Khan who is an attorney called the rescue police. The police arrived in 15 minutes and temporarily brought the situation under control. However, the police did not arrest these armed men and let them loose again. My family locked the doors and started praying.

The same day after few hours around mid-night (12:45 ~ 01:25 a.m.) 19th February these terrorists along with some local residents came with the firearms and hurled bricks and stones at my house. They started to accuse me of converting people and proselytizing. They wanted to burn our house and were inciting people to kill our family. Our neighbours who are the only Muslim family in our street were the informants and main witnesses that our guest house was being used for the evangelism and gospel activities.

In this whole incident the local police who had taken bribes from these extremists groups were actively supporting them. The local police even arrested my driver/helper Mr. Pervaiz Masih, Mr. Nazish Nadeem and Church security guards [Mr. Rafiq Masih and Mr. Shahzad].

They wanted to illegally possess our pastor/guest house but our Church security guards bravely resisted them. Then these extremists opened fire at our Pastor house. Mr. Sajid Masih was shot at the ribs and Mr. Boota was severely beaten and thrown from the 20 feet roof. My son Arman called the elite force but they responded very slowly.

Mr. Sajid and Mr. Boota were immediately rushed to the emergency hospital in the ambulance where doctors operated for more than four hours to take out the bullet from Mr. Sajid's ribs. Still, Mr. Sajid is in critical condition and doctors have told that his arm may have to be amputated in order to save his life. The x-ray reports have shown that the bullet is stuck in one of his ribs.

So far, this extremist group has the political and financial support. The local police instead of arresting these criminals has filed a wrongful case in which they have named me the prime suspect, my accused my son of being the terrorist and falsely accused more than 20 believers of our congregation and family members.

We tried to approach the city police and they have demanded more than 200,000 PKR in bribes for the sake of security. This tragic event has taken us by surprise and we feel hopeless at the hands of law and local police. We are trying to contact media but the opposite group has more resources and has already brainwashed the media.

Please keep my family and congregation in prayers in this hour of horrific terror and unrest.

Rev.Dr. Altaf Khan & Mrs. Kim Mi Kyeong Khan
Co-Founders Grace Foundations
Acting Moderator Presbyterian Church of Pakistan
ww.graceandgospel.org

Tel: +(92)-412 406434
Fax: +(92)-412 406435
Cell: +(92)-300 8668981

Pakistani Christians for divorce law that saves women from polygamy

By Jibran Khan

Asia News (07.02.2012) – The National Commission for Justice and Peace and leading Catholic and Protestant religious leaders are among the promoters of changes to the law. Currently, an 1869 law is in place, which is discriminatory towards Christians. The goal is greater protection for women who will be able to settle cases of abuses and polygamy more quickly.

Islamabad (AsiaNews) – At the end of a long political and legal battle, Christians have won a first round against the country's marriage and divorce laws. With the National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP) of the Catholic Church leading the charge, a series of amendments were presented to the Human Rights Ministry.

For the past few years, representatives of the Catholic Church, the Church of Pakistan (which is the result of the merger of the Anglican, Methodist and Lutheran Churches with the Church of Scotland), the United Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church of Pakistan, Pentecostal Churches and the Salvation Army Pakistan have pushed for changes to a 1869 law in order to give Christian minorities greater legal rights and better protection in a country where they are discriminated even in such area.

Christian marriage and divorce are regulated by the Christian Marriages Act of 1872 and the Divorce Act of 1869, which are now outdated parts of the civil law. Under such laws, it can take years before a court dissolves a marriage. For the Muslim majority, getting married and divorcing are relatively easy, a matter of a few months. For Christians, the issues at stake are freedom of conscience, the sacredness of the institution and more.

Substantive changes to the law will soon go before Pakistan's National Assembly to improve the divorce law. Until now, grounds for the dissolution were limited to adultery and the process could take up to eight years and required a decision of the High Court.

For human rights activists and Church leaders, the matter also involves Christian women married to men who, after converting to Islam, took other wives, creating polygamous families as well as Christian women repudiated by their husbands or victims of spousal abuse. Bigamy and adultery among Christians are outside the scope of the 1964 Family Courts Ordinance, which applies only to Muslims.

In the past, a three-member Christian committee had tried to promote changes but their action was interrupted by the October 1999 coup by General Pervez Musharraf.

Speaking to AsiaNews, Fr Anwar Patras, a priest in Rawalpindi, the proposed changes are a "great step". In his view, "efforts are finally becoming a reality." The existing laws were a source of "great suffering" with cases languishing in court "for over eight years without any result."

At present, a marriage can be dissolved under various circumstances; for example, if it is not consummated within a year of its celebration or if a spouse is exposed to dangers. For such circumstances, Christian religious leaders want new rules to speed up the process of dissolution.

Christian charged with 'Blasphemy' in Pakistan denied bail

Young man accused after argument with his landlord.

By Murad Khan

Compass Direct News (30.01.2012) – A judge has denied bail to a young Christian man charged with desecrating the Quran under Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws despite the lack of evidence against him, sources said.

Police in Shahdara, near Lahore, had arrested 23-year-old Khuram Masih on Dec. 5 and charged him with desecrating the Quran after his landlord, Zulfiqar Ali, alleged that he had burned pages of the book in order to prepare tea. Section 295-B makes willful desecration of the Quran or use of an extract in a derogatory manner punishable with life imprisonment.

Masih's previous lawyers, Muhammad Farhad Tirmizi and Liaqat John, on Jan. 3 petitioned for his bail. In their petition, they stated to Additional Sessions Judge Anjum Raza Syed that police had registered a false case against Masih based on hearsay, and that police had not found any incriminating evidence.

Judge Syed, however, refused to grant bail to Masih on grounds that the case was "very sensitive, and bail to the accused would fan religious sentiments and cause a great mishap."

Asif Aqeel, executive director of the Community Development Initiative (CDI), an affiliate of the European Centre for Law and Justice, told Compass that the lawyers hired by Masih's relatives should not have petitioned the trial court for Masih's bail so soon.

"There's no use moving for bail in the trial court, because the lower courts cannot sustain pressure in such cases," Aqeel said. "The judges in trial court are under extreme pressure from religious quarters and simply cannot set a blasphemy accused free on bail after just a month of the incident."

He added that, similarly, trial courts in blasphemy cases tend to deliver guilty verdicts due to the same pressures from Muslims.

CDI lawyer Niaz Amer, who has now acquired Masih's power of attorney, would make efforts for his bail in the Lahore High Court once the proceedings begin, Aqeel added.

"It is very unfortunate for those accused of blasphemy, but this is how the legal system of Pakistan operates," he said. "The accused have to spend several months, even years, in jail without bail, just because the judges are unwilling to put their own lives at risk from religious extremists."

In their petition for bail, Masih's lawyers stated that in First Information Report (FIR) No. 1211/2011, complainant Ali had claimed that Masih's neighbors had tried to stop him from burning the pages of the Quran and had ignored their requests, and that the Christian ran away when Ali arrived at his home.

"It is further alleged in the FIR that the petitioner [Masih] was arrested later from the same spot when the police arrived," the bail application states, adding that the charges against Masih were concocted and baseless because the complainant had not witnessed the alleged incident. No other person is mentioned in the FIR to substantiate the allegations.

At the same time, Napoleon Qayyum, a Christian rights advocate and field officer of CDI, denied reports that Masih has been tortured or mistreated by prison authorities.

"Someone has misreported that Masih has been tortured at the District Camp Jail, where he is currently being held," Qayyum said. "I am in regular contact with Masih and his family, and he has not been harmed by anyone in jail."

Masih has said that he was falsely accused in the case because he had had an argument with his landlord, Ali, earlier in the day over the rent of the house in which he and his wife, Bano, a convert from Hinduism, lived along with five other families.

A Christian rights activist in Shahdara, Khalid Shahzad, had earlier told Compass that police had shown unnecessary haste in registering the case (see "Christian Charged with 'Blasphemy' after Argument," Dec. 26, 2011).
