

Table of Contents

- ***Christians' faces painted black and heads shaved following blasphemy allegations***
 - ***Tempers high in Sindh after two allegations of blasphemy***
 - ***Blasphemy law reform drafted in Pakistan as three more Christians are accused***
 - ***22 Muslims arrested for the attack on the Christian area: massacre avoided thanks to Islamic leaders***
 - ***Ahmedis in a Chakwal village fear for their lives***
 - ***Muslim mob attacks church and Christian colony after Christian accused of blasphemy***
 - ***Pakistan's Christians faithful and resilient in face of persecution***
 - ***Muslim leaders condemn Lahore church attacks***
 - ***14 dead and more than 70 wounded in Taliban attack against two Christian churches***
 - ***Pakistan rally celebrates Charlie Hebdo attackers***
 - ***PM's ambitious action plan and minorities***
-

Christians' faces painted black and heads shaved following blasphemy allegations

CLASS (02.07.2015) - A Christian family had their faces painted black, their heads shaved and a garland of shoes placed around their necks, before being paraded through a village following blasphemy accusations.

The attack was prompted when the Muslim wife of a milkman, Kaneez Asghar, asked for a plastic sheet – which had some Arabic script on it – that was being used as a floor mat at the home of Rehana Qamar and Awais Qamar in the village of Maki Chak 460 in the district of Sheikhpura, Punjab.

When Kaneez visited the home she saw the children sitting on the mat and eating food. She noticed some Hadith words written on it – “Oh my Lord, increase me in my knowledge”.

Being uneducated, Rehana and Rukhsana, who also lived at the address, could not read what was written.

Kaneez asked Rehana to give the mat to her as it had some holy words on it, but Rehana said that she bought it from Faisalabad and could only sell to her.

Kaneez offered to pay 400 rupees, while Rehana asked for 1000. After some discussion Kaneez said that she would get the money from home, and went away.

But she returned with local Muslim Nasir Sansara Bhatti, who pulled Rehana's hairs and slapped her, taking the plastic mat and photographs of it. Nasir called upon other locals - Muhammad Asif, Muhammad Yawar and Muhammad Riaz - who started shouting that Rehana's family should be killed as they had committed blasphemy.

Meanwhile more women and men gathered as it was announced in the local mosques through loud speakers. The people incited a mob to burn Rehana's family alive.

At the time Rehana's husband Awais Qamar was not in the village, as he serves Chaudhry Ghafur Chadar in the next village. Upon learning about the incident, Chaudhry said that Awais had a good character at work and said that he will look after Awais in all circumstances, ensuring his protection.

As Ashraf Masih, Awais brother returned home from was working in the fields, local Muslims shaved his head, painted his face black and hung a garland of shoes around his neck.

The mob paraded him through the village on the back of a donkey, while some local Muslim women painted Rehana and Rukhsana's faces black and also pulled their hair.

As the situation deteriorated, a local pastor called on 15 police offices because the mob was growing.

Shortly after arriving at the scene, the police took the victims into custody for their own safety.

A senior police officer told Qari Ghulam Yaseen, leader of local Jama-e-Masjid Maki Chak 460 what happened, and asked him to issue a 'fatwa'.

Qari Yaseen ordered that 'no man should touch any women of the Christian families' adding 'as these women had no intention of insulting Islam, therefore, they must be forgiven for any unintentional act'.

The DPO and Qari further shared an agreement between Christians Muslims signed by to settle the issue and no police report was made in the local police station. The sheet which created issue was taken into police custody.

The Police have kept both families at safe place with the consent of the local Pastor.

CLAAS's team has offered all its support to the families, and has also thanked the police assigned at the residence of the victims for security purposes while Nasir Saeed, Director of CLAAS-UK has condemned those who took the law into their own hands and humiliated Christians in such an extreme way.

He said: "Living in the same village with dignity and honor will be impossible for the families, and is one of the worst punishments imaginable. They will be living in hell for the rest of their lives, as they will as have lost respect in their own eyes.

"It is a very unfortunate situation for the Christians, especially those living in the villages where they are a minority, because they are looked upon as inferior to the Muslims and with hatred for being Christians. They are not allowed to touch Muslims' utensils - as we are all aware of Aasia Bibi's case.

"It is a pity that although the government and politicians are aware that the Blasphemy law is being widely misused, they take no action. However, there is some news that the interior ministry has planned to represent a bill in parliament to stop the ongoing misuse of the blasphemy law, but there has been no progress."

Because of the continuous misuse of blasphemy law against them, Christians lead a fearful life and see no future for themselves or future generations in Pakistan, because of the blasphemy law. They have no hope and therefore they are looking upon their

brothers and sisters in Christ, across the world, to speak for them and to pray for their safety.

Mr Saeed said that this is the time for world leaders and international institutions, especially the EU and United Nations, to look into the ongoing Christians' persecution and ask questions of the Pakistani government, and demand Pakistan to bring its law in to the line with the international treaties it has ratified and is obliged to comply with.

Tempers high in Sindh after two allegations of blasphemy

TFT Issue (26.06.2015) - A Muslim man was accused of desecrating a Hindu temple, and a Christian man was accused of desecrating the Holy Quran – both are said to be mentally challenged

On March 3, 27-year-old Lutfullah Lashari was accused of damaging the idols of Shiva and Parvati in a Hindu temple in Hyderabad. The very next day, 22-year-old Yaqoob Bashir Masih was accused of desecrating the Holy Quran in Mirpur Khas.

Karam Chand, the priest in charge and the caretaker of the Durga Shiva Temple in the Circuit House, said Lashari entered the temple and did *pranam* (the Hindu greeting) before he entered the worship place. They thought that he was one of the devotees. "Soon, I heard a noise and rushed inside, where I saw that Lutfullah had taken out a hammer from his bag and was breaking the idols of Shiva and Parvati," he said. "I overpowered Lutfullah with the help of my two sons and then we informed the police."

"Our investigation shows that Lutfullah was under medical treatment for mental illness since 2003," said the local police Station House Officer, Muhammad Ayoob Sumroo. "Regardless, the first information report (number 43/2015) has been registered and Lutfullah is now in a three-day physical remand for investigation."

Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankawani, a member of the National Assembly from the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, said he had visited the desecrated temple. Senior Superintendent of Police Irfan Baloch had taken quick action and arrested the suspect, he said.

the lawmaker said. "The Sindh government was supposed to provide me a security plan in this regard several months ago, but it has failed to do it so far. Due to increasing religious extremism in our society, the protection of worship places is the need of the hour."

He acknowledges it is not easy. "Even though it is very challenging to deploy security guards round the clock to protect religious places, at least there should be a plan to put barbed wire, and install security gates and surveillance cameras so that we could check this social evil."

According to the daily Dawn, the magistrate has ordered Lutfullah's medical examination to ascertain if he is mentally challenged. A number of Hindus took out a protest rally in Hyderabad the next day. People's Party MNA Ramesh Lal disapproved, saying that after Lutfullah's arrest, the protest was unnecessary.

Only 50 miles away, Yaqoob Bashir Masih was accused of burning a copy of the Holy Quran. "It was around 7 pm, and I was sitting with my wife on our camel cart. We were discussing how earning a living had become so hard, when we started heard a group of people shouting," said Mushtaq Masih, a resident of Mehmoodabad who lived next door to Yaqoob before the incident.

His elder brother was asking him where the copy of the Holy Quran was that a local cleric had given him.

Locals say Yaqoob used to go to a local cleric who had given him a copy of the Holy Quran, and that morning, some students of a nearby madrassah had claimed they saw him burning it. They told a cleric.

"After being beaten up and doused with kerosene oil, he said he had burned and buried it," said Mushtaq, who has now left the neighborhood.

He says Yaqoob "sometimes behaved as if he was possessed by a demon and had no control over himself" and had even tried to learn black magic some years ago.

Catholic priest Abid Habib says Yaqoob had received treatment for mental illness from a mental health facility in Hyderabad. "A local cleric had promised him that he would be cured if he recited the Holy Quran."

Three days before the incident, Yaqoob's mother said he had torn the Bible and thrown it on the floor.

"Some say that he was also drug addict and was under the influence of drugs when he committed the act of desecration," said the priest.

As the news spread, a mob came to the locality chanting slogans against Christians, but the police and Rangers brought the situation under control. At about 1am that night, the police told the Christians to leave the colony, as more than 200 protestors demanded the colony be burned down.

"I visited the area next day but all the Christians had fled by then," Mushtaq said.

Mehmoodabad Police Station House Officer Muhammad Dawood said there were three police vans protecting the neighborhood. "After Yaqoob confessed, a mob locked him in a house and informed the police," he said. "He also confessed in front of the police and sought forgiveness, but I told him that he should seek forgiveness from Allah." Yaqoob behaved normally in the court, and told the magistrate he was sorry, he said.

Meanwhile, although Mushtaq thinks his belongings are safe in Mirpur Khas, he says he does not want to take the risk of going back home.

Blasphemy law reform drafted in Pakistan as three more Christians are accused

Morning Star News (17.06.2015) <http://morningstarnews.org/2015/06/blasphemy-law-reform-drafted-in-pakistan-as-three-more-christians-are-accused/> - The Pakistani

government has finished drafting a bill to combat abuse of blasphemy laws to which three Christians in the past month alone have fallen prey, sources said.

In Nankana Sahib District of Punjab Province, a Muslim accused a 94-year-old Christian landowner of blaspheming Islam in retaliation for the landowner's attempt to resolve a disagreement over profit-sharing on a cornfield. Chaudhry Habil Qaiser of Martinpur village on May 27 filed an application with the predominantly Christian area's inter-faith harmony committee asserting that Maulvi Muhammad Bashir, who used to till his land, was spreading false rumors that he had blasphemed Islam.

"Despite my repeated calls to Bashir, he refused to come to my house and discuss the issue," Qaiser told Morning Star News. "On May 25, Malik Ghulam Amjad, a Muslim from a neighboring village, told me on the telephone that Bashir was propagating that I had mocked Islamic tenets in his presence. This propaganda was disseminated in several Muslim-inhabited villages."

Qaiser has spent all his life in the same village and is widely respected throughout the district, and the allegations of blasphemy fell on deaf ears. But Bashir then filed an application with Abdul Hameed Rehmani, local head of a group called *Tahafuz Khatam-e-Nabuvat*, or Protectors of Prophet's Finality, stepping up fears that the Christian village could face a mob attack.

Police had information about the matter and were waiting for either of the two parties to approach them for intervention, said the district police chief of Nankana.

"Our intelligence sources reported that no one in the villages had taken notice of Bashir's claims, and there was no imminent threat of an attack on the Christians," the chief, Kamran Yousaf, told Morning Star News.

He said police were closely monitoring the situation and were ready to intervene if necessary, but that it was better that the village council deal with the accuser.

On Sunday (June 14), a 30-member council comprising Christians and Muslims and headed by the Islamist leader, Rehmani, gathered at a local church in the village, where they asked Bashir to repeat his allegations and present witnesses and evidence against Qaiser. Bashir admitted that he had no case and apologized for trying to turn a monetary dispute into a religious issue.

Reform

Pakistan's internationally condemned blasphemy statutes also are used to punish people whose psychological challenges cast doubt on whether they could intentionally blaspheme, and if so whether they legally could be held responsible.

In the Mehmoodabad area of Mirpur Khas in Sindh Province, Christians earlier this month abandoned their homes to escape possible Islamic attacks after a young Christian man who is said to be mentally challenged, Yaqoob Bashir, allegedly told local Muslims he had burned a copy of the Koran.

A mob gathered and threatened to set him on fire. Police took Bashir into custody, which saved his life, sources said.

Bashir's neighbors said the accused frequently visited a Muslim cleric who told him that reciting koranic verses would help in treating his mental condition. Bashir on June 4 reportedly approached the cleric and sought a copy of the Koran. He then allegedly burned the Koran at his home and buried the ashes.

A case against Bashir was registered in the Mehmoodabad Police Station, where Bashir is said to have confessed and sought forgiveness. Pakistan's blasphemy statutes require intent to be proven for conviction.

Another Christian said to be mentally unstable, Humayun Faisal, was accused of desecrating the Koran a couple of weeks earlier in Lahore. Faisal was immediately taken into custody, and a case was registered against him under Section 295-B for desecrating the Koran, but that did not stop Muslim mobs from rampaging in the Dhoop Sari area of Lahore where Faisal lives, source said.

Police and paramilitary troops averted major losses by baton-charging the crowds to bring calm.

In light of frequent abuses, the federal government has finished drafting of a bill to forestall abuse of the blasphemy statutes. Proposed by the Interior Ministry and vetted by the Law Ministry, the bill aims to keep anyone from taking the law into their own hands. According to a report by the Islamabad-based Centre for Research and Security Studies, 52 people accused of blasphemy have been murdered since 1990.

The bill also metes out harsh penalties for those who have levelled false accusations of blasphemy, according to officials.

A report in the *Express Tribune* cited a senior official at the Interior Ministry as saying that procedural loopholes in Pakistan Penal Code's Section 295-C, blaspheming Muhammad, have been identified and some new clauses incorporated into the bill. Speaking ill of the prophet of Islam is punishable by death in Pakistan.

According to the official, the new law would make it necessary to prove not just intent but "bad intent," or *mens rea*, for conviction. *Mens rea* is a legal phrase used to describe the mental state a person must be in while committing a crime for it to be considered intentional. It can refer to a general intent to break the law or a specific, premeditated plan to commit a particular offense.

European countries' concern over the rising tide of abuse of the blasphemy law is said to be a primary reason for the new legislation.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan recently reported that abuse of the blasphemy law continues to take a heavy toll in terms of human lives and harassment of citizens. At least 14 people are on death row, and 19 others are serving life sentences, on blasphemy charges. Investigations have revealed that the reasons for the accusations often stem from personal enmity, property disputes and religious hatred.

22 Muslims arrested for the attack on the Christian area: massacre avoided thanks to Islamic leaders

Agenzia Fides (09.06.2015) - 22 Muslims arrested and more than 700 under investigation for the mass attack against the Christian area of Sandha, in Lahore, which occurred on May 24 following accusations of alleged blasphemy committed by the Christian Humayun Faisal. This is what local Christian lawyers told Fides. Faisal, mentally disabled, had been accused of burning pages of the Koran. The crowd tried to lynch him but the police arrested him, and saved him. The anger of the protesters turned then to the houses of the neighborhood where the man lived, and only a quick police intervention avoided a "collective punishment" that could have become a massacre.

The police (in the collision an agent was wounded) registered a complaint against 700 people, arresting 22, including the imam Liaqat Jamait Islami, who incited Muslims to violence.

As reported to Fides by the NGO CLAAS, who is following the case, the Muslim leader Haji Pir Shafiq tried to stop the attackers and saved Humayun's life, handing him over to the police.

"Two other Muslim leaders distinguished themselves for their intervention in favor of Christians" says to Fides Dominican Fr. James Channan, Director of the "Peace Center" in Lahore. "The imam of the mosque in Lahore, Abdul Khabir Azad, having learned of the unrest, went

immediately on the spot and stayed there until three in the morning, parleying with local Muslim leaders to stop any form of violence. Even Alama Tahir Ashrafi, chairman of the Pakistan Ulema Council, arrived at the scene to mediate. The two condemned any retaliation on innocent Christians, helping to restore calm. They acted for justice, giving a good example", said Fr.Channan: "When a Christian is only accused of alleged blasphemy (to be proved) there are people who incite to violence and a whole community is responsible. This is an incredible and unacceptable fact for the rule of law".

Meanwhile, lawyers are hoping that, given the mental state of Humayun Faisal, the accusation of blasphemy can be cancelled. In the district of Sandha there is great fear among Christians: some of them have preferred to temporarily leave their homes for fear of retaliation. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 09/06/2015)

Ahmedis in a Chakwal village fear for their lives

By Nabeel Anwar Dhakku

Dawn (09.06.2015) - <http://ahmadiyyatimes.blogspot.be/2015/06/pakistan-ahmedis-in-chakwal-village.html#more> - On a first visit, one only notices the calm which engulfs the sleepy village of Pichnand, located some 90 kilometres from the district capital, in Talagang tehsil. Most of its 24,000 residents earn their livelihood from agriculture and cattle farming.

And walking through the quiet winding streets of the village, it is hard to tell that underneath the calm, simmer religious tensions with extremism on the rise in the Talagang tehsil, 45 kilometres from Chakwal. New blasphemy cases are routinely registered in the area, in most of which a man named Mohammad Saeed is the complainant and an advocate named Tariq Mehmood is the counsel.

The growing number of such cases has left 80 members of the Ahmedi community, who occupy 15 houses in the Pichnand village, in perpetual state of fear. Religious conferences are regularly organised in the village where hate speech is delivered against the marginalised Ahmedi community. These events have also put the village under the spotlight of the local press.

The latest blow came on May 4, when on the orders of a District and Sessions court, the minarets and dome of the sole worship place of Ahmedis in the village were demolished.

According to law, a worship place of Ahmedis cannot have minarets or domes as it makes it resemble a mosque. The demolition was welcomed by religious leaders of the area from Deobandi and Barelvi sects alike and for days, local newspapers ran statements

from religious leaders who hailed it as a positive step. This has intensified hatred against the Ahmedis in the village.

The central deputy general secretary of Majlis-i-Ehrar Islam Pakistan (MEIP), Dr Omar Farooq, wrote a highly inflammatory article in a local Urdu newspaper titled 'Qadianis in Pichnand face defeat'.

"We cannot call our worship place a mosque, neither can our worship places have minarets nor domes as these are the symbols of a mosque. We cannot call the Azaan on a loud speaker. We are not even allowed to say 'Asalam-o-Alaikum' as we are banned to do so by law," laments an elder of the Ahmedi community in the village.

"Of course, such law only exists in Pakistan," he hastens to add.

The first Ahmedi of this village was Malik Mohammad Khan a soldier in the British Army, who during the First World War became an Ahmedi. Most Ahmedi residents of the village today belong to lower social castes and are vulnerable to attacks at the hands of extremist clerics.

"The situation was quite peaceful till 2008 when a campaign was launched against us by some hardliner clerics residing in Talagang," says an Ahmedi resident.

In 2008 some clerics from Talagang city launched a campaign against Ahmedis claiming that they were trying to expand their worship place. This campaign resulted in the registration of a case in 2011.

Since 2008, anti-Ahmedi literature is routinely distributed in the village. Three years later the first conference titled 'Tahafuz-i-Khatam-i-Nabuwat' was organised in the village by Tehreek-i-Tahafuz-i-Khatam-i-Nabuwat (TTKN) in which the religious leaders deliver hate speech against Ahmedis.

"Pamphlets filled with abusive and derogatory slogans against us are distributed in the village and members of the MEIP and the TTKN put up anti-Ahmedi stickers on the doors of shops and houses in the village," says another Ahmedi.

Copies of the pamphlets, available with Dawn, speak volumes about the gravity of the situation. One pamphlet issued by the MEIP carries a list of 35 Ahmedi men of the village. The addresses and even castes of all these 35 individuals are mentioned along with their names. The pamphlet urges Muslims of mainstream sects to socially and politically boycott these Ahmedis.

"Such kind of hate material is intensifying the security risk we face. Our children are bullied in the village school and we fear for their lives," says another member of the Ahmedi community.

The Ahmedis in this village question the seriousness of the much-touted National Action Plan (NAP). "Where is the NAP when hate speeches continue to be delivered and columns against us are published in the press," asks an Ahmedi.

A police official while admitting the sensitivity of the situation said: "Everyone should be free to live their life in accordance with their religion."

Talking to Dawn, Amir Mehmood, in-charge of Press Section of Jamaat-i-Ahmediya Pakistan expressed concerns over the plight of Ahmedis in Pakistan.

"We actively participated in the Pakistan Movement but today the space for our community is shrinking each day," he says.

"In Lahore, 86 Ahmedis were butchered and our women were burnt alive in Gujranwala but we did not even stage a peaceful protest rally. We are bearing all this silently," he adds.

Holding government responsible for the plight of Ahmedis, Mr Mehmood says the situation is getting worse each day.

"It is the responsibility of the state to protect its citizens irrespective of their religious association," he says.

When approached, District Police Officer (DPO) Dr Moeen Masood vowed to take action against those involved in spreading hatred against Ahmedis.

"Nobody would be allowed to violate the law. We would take legal action against those who are publishing such hate material," he said.

Muslim mob attacks church and Christian colony after Christian accused of blasphemy

Class (25.05.2015) - Christian homes and a church have been attacked by an angry Muslim mob after blasphemy allegations were made against a Christian man.

According to reports, on May 24 the gang opened fire, threw missiles and threatened to kill Christians in Sandha, Lahore, after Humayun Masih, 27, was accused of burning pages of the Holy Quran.

Humayun is married with two daughters, but his wife left him because of his mental condition. He has been arrested and is in police custody, and it is believed that he has been declared mentally unstable by the hospital.

Read More: <http://www.claas.org.uk/news/pakistan-muslim-mob-attacks-church-and-christian-colony-after-christian-accused-of-blasphemy/>

Pakistan's Christians faithful and resilient in face of persecution

ENS (14.04.2015) - <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2015/04/14/pakistans-christians-faithful-and-resilient-in-face-of-persecution/> Pakistan is one of the world's most troubling epicenters for terrorism where minorities are targeted by religious extremists for having different beliefs or affiliations. Yet the persecuted Christian community – 1.5 percent of 180 million people – remains steadfast in faith despite the daily persecution they face.

Last month, two bomb blasts in a Christian neighborhood of the Pakistani city of Lahore killed 17 people and wounded more than 70 as worshipers attended Sunday Mass at St.

John's Roman Catholic Church and Christ Church, a Church of Pakistan church and a member of the Anglican Communion.

"Messages of love and support have flooded in, and churches and agencies around the Anglican Communion are working together to ensure an effective and coordinated practical response as well as continued prayer," according to a news release from the Anglican Alliance, which connects and strengthens the development, relief and advocacy activities of churches, agencies and networks of the Anglican Communion.

On a recent conference call with representatives of Anglican Communion churches and agencies, Bishop Irfan Jamil of the Diocese of Lahore talked about the priorities for his church and community after the bombings.

Jamil and his team have been visiting the bereaved and those injured by the bomb blasts, the release said. Episcopal Relief & Development has sent a solidarity grant to enable the church to respond to those in need following the attacks.

The Church of Pakistan (United) and the Roman Catholic Church held a joint funeral service for the victims. Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby joined the service by phone and his prayers were translated and shared with the mourners.

"Bishop Jamil inspired those on the [conference] call with his emphasis on the role of church leaders in building peace, harmony and mutual understanding and with his message to the Anglican Communion to continue to stand alongside the Church in Pakistan in these times of trauma," the release said.

The most devastating attack in Pakistan happened in September 2013 when two suicide bombers targeted All Saints Anglican Church in Peshawar at the end of a Sunday worship service, killing 127 people and injuring 170. Many of the victims were women and children.

Bishop Samuel Azariah of the Diocese of Raiwind, moderator of the Church of Pakistan, spoke with Episcopal News Service shortly after that tragic day, saying that even after years of intense persecution from religious extremists, the Christian population in Pakistan is growing in numbers. "Nothing will dampen our spirits. Bombing, murder, burning, shooting will not dampen our spirits and our commitment to Jesus Christ," he said.

Bishop of Peshawar Humphrey Peters said in an Easter message last week that the terrorist attacks "have left a permanent scar on the memory and soul of the Christian community of Pakistan ... On the one hand, all these threats, incidents of violence and targeted persecution dishearten the Christian community of Pakistan. But on the other, it has strengthened the faith and ... their commitment of faithfulness with Lord Jesus Christ."

It was this resilience and deep faith that the Very Rev. Patrick Augustine experienced when he visited Pakistan earlier this year as an expression of solidarity with the Christian community there.

The Pakistan-born rector of Christ Episcopal Church in La Crosse, Wisconsin, preached during Sunday worship on Jan. 25 at the now-heavily guarded All Saints, built in the ancient bazaar of the old city Peshawar in 1865. He found a church that is thriving and full of faithful Christians. "I was touched by the power and commitment of their faith," he told ENS.

"The terrorists believe they have a cause to impose Islam by violent force, beheadings and detonating explosives to kill those whose belief systems differ," he added. "Suffering is everywhere and it has overwhelmed our humanity."

Christians in Pakistan are "pounded by Islamists in brutal suicide bombings, daily harassment and imprisonments," Augustine said.

There is the prominent case of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman and mother of five who was arrested in June 2009 after being accused of insulting the Prophet Muhammad – which she denies – and sentenced to death by hanging. She is still in a Pakistani jail despite almost 1 million people worldwide appealing for her release. Some blasphemy charge cases receive high profile in the media, but thousands more go unreported.

Pakistani blasphemy law identifies it as a crime to defile the Holy Quran, with a possible sentence of life imprisonment. But offenses against the Prophet Muhammad may be punishable by death.

"This draconian law is a sword hanging over every Christian's head. Once accused, the individual is at risk from zealous Islamists who believe that they earn merit with Allah by killing a blasphemer," Augustine said. "Thousands of innocent people have been imprisoned and killed on false charges of blasphemy."

Augustine lamented the inaction of the Pakistan government, which, he says, "has allowed extreme Islamic groups to propagate hate ... violence, intolerance and spread extreme ideas into ordinary mosques and community centers."

But Augustine – who in 2012 was awarded the Cross of St. Augustine by former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams in recognition of his contributions internationally to evangelism, ecumenism, and peace and reconciliation between faiths – said that "people want peace. We live in a world fashioned by God so that we all need one another as members of the human family. There are people of goodwill among both Christians and Muslims. I beg all people of goodwill to speak out and not fall prey as silent spectators."

The Episcopal Church's Executive Council at its March meeting passed a resolution condemning the use of religion for the purpose of advancing political agendas "directed at terrorizing, victimizing, and oppressing individuals and communities and impairing their ability to enjoy basic human rights because of their religious beliefs and social, ethnic, class, caste, gender, and national affiliations."

The resolution also calls on the world's governments "to confront the reality of religious persecution, protect religious minorities and civilians within the framework of international and humanitarian law, address political exclusion and economic desperation that are being manipulated by the forces of extremists, scale up humanitarian and development assistance to host countries and trusted NGOs, and accept for resettlement a fair share of the most vulnerable people where return to their countries of origin is impossible."

The Rev. Canon Robert Edmunds, Middle East partnership officer for the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, said: "We sometimes hear the term 'Christian presence' in the Middle East and it sounds passive and lacking in vitality when the truth of the matter for those who live there is quite different. The Christian presence throughout the region is about Christians whose family and religious roots reach back to the time of Christ. These are not sojourners in a strange and foreign land, but people whose lives are an integral part of the landscape, the history, the culture and the traditions which have and continue to shape each generation."

The presence of the Christian churches throughout the region "provides the language of love of God and all neighbors which is in danger of being silenced," Edmunds added. "We in the West must continue to give these atrocities visibility both in terms of solidarity with our brother and sister Christians, but to encourage political leaders to seek lasting and durable solutions for peace for the benefit of all. To lose the Christian voice in the region would be catastrophic for the future."

Augustine's friends, family and parishioners expressed concern about him visiting Pakistan at such a volatile time. But on his journey, Augustine said that he found countless signs of hope and unexpected surprises.

One early Sunday morning in February, Augustine and 20 Christians from Islamabad drove for four hours to be with a Christian family near Muzaffargarh. The family has been living there since 1933, but they are the only Christians in an otherwise exclusively Islamic area. Augustine described it as a deep privilege and a historical day as he relayed how he was asked to celebrate Holy Communion and preach, then lay the foundation of a church that will seat 50 people.

On his first day of arrival in Islamabad, he visited a tailor's shop with a friend. One of the Muslim brothers who run the shop asked Augustine to pray for him. When Augustine told him that he prays in the name of Jesus the brother said that he had no objection to that.

As he was about to leave, the other two brothers approached Augustine and asked him to pray with them also. "I looked at them and saw in their eyes hunger for God for healing and blessing," he said. "I laid my hands on them and asked God to bless them, their shop and bless Pakistan to be a land with peace. This was an amazing opportunity to experience in a land where Christians are discriminated and persecuted on daily basis."

Two days later, Peters, the bishop of Peshawar, received a phone call about an attack by a Muslim mob on a Christian-run school in the city of Bannu. The school has 1,800 students and 99 percent are Muslim. Peters and four clergy decided to leave immediately and Augustine was invited to accompany them. "It is a highly security-sensitive area and not many Americans would be able to make this dangerous journey. It was a privilege to go ... and stand in solidarity with a suffering church," Augustine said.

Inside the compound, there were 200 Christian families internally displaced from the Waziristan area, a stronghold of Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces and the region where American drones have targeted terrorists.

"One million are internally displaced," Augustine said. "Christian families were living in refugee camps ... and not given food and shelter. It has been an Anglican area since 1860s. The bishop invited Christians to pitch tents inside the church compound where the school and hospital are situated. They are able to provide education and medical help to Muslims and Christians in this city.

"I spent one whole day visiting these displaced people, listening to their stories, holding hands and praying with them. ... I did not get a sense that these people were ready to give up their faith, but that they were very strong, deeply rooted and committed to following Jesus in the way of the cross."

Muslim leaders condemn Lahore church attacks

Asia News (16.03.2015) <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Muslim-leaders-condemn-Lahore-church-attacks-33733.html> - At least 50 Islamic religious leaders unanimously condemned the suicide attacks that struck **two churches in Lahore**, killing 17 people, including **some Muslims**.

Allama Thair Ashrafi, head of the Pakistan Ulema Council (PUC), was one of them. "The government should strictly follow the newly unveiled national action plan in curbing terrorism," he told *AsiaNews*.

Speaking at a press conference, he and 20 other Islamic scholars held at the Lahore Press Club, he went on to say that "There is no division between good or bad Taliban; whoever is guilty must be punished. " The "13,600 madrassas and 74,000 mosques linked with the council are cooperating with government in standing against terrorism".

Calling what happened "a great tragedy," Ashrafi explained that as soon as the attacks were known, "We immediately took madrasa students to the hospitals where the wounded had been brought. We reject all forms of terrorism."

As funerals got underway today, the streets of Youhanabad, the Christian quarter, filled with the sound of weeping and crying. Tensions remain high in the city. Local TV stations have broadcast scenes of Christians and Muslims clashing in some parts of Lahore. In view of the situation, army rangers have been deployed to maintain law and order.

"We cannot endorse this reaction," Irfan Mufti, executive director of the South Asia Partnership-Pakistan (SAP), told *AsiaNews*. "Catholic bishops must clearly say that those involved in the killing [of terrorist suspects] were not with the Christians. Christianity is a religion of peace, and we expect the same message."

In fact, like Mgr Joseph Coutts, archbishop of Karachi and President of the Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference of Pakistan (PCBC), the Bishop of Faisalabad Mgr Joseph Arshad has condemned the lynching of two suspected terrorists. He urged Christians to "remain peaceful" and call on "everyone to abstain from summary justice."

"Only animals kill [people] and destroy churches, mosques, Imambargahs (Shia congregation halls, and other places of worship," said Abdul Kabor Azad, a preacher (khatib) from the Badshahi Mosque - the second largest in Pakistan. "Most ulema," he noted, "are united against terrorism and many have received threats for speaking out against the Taliban."

"We share the pain of our Christian brothers," Azad added. "Together we shall try to build a peaceful and prosperous country. I ask Christians to remain tolerant."

However, many Pakistanis remain sceptical about the statements by Islamic leaders. For many people, they are responsible for the prevailing religious intolerance in Pakistani society.

A delegation of Muslim scholars found this out when they joined a demonstration organised outside the headquarters of the Punjab Legislative Assembly.

Mufti Muhammad Muneeb-ur-Rehman, chairman of the Roet-e-Hilal Central Committee and the Tanzim ul Madaris Al Arbia, had to cut short his address when protestors started shouting slogans against mullaism.

14 dead and more than 70 wounded in Taliban attack against two Christian churches

Asia News (15.03.2015) <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Lahore:-14-dead-and-more-than-70-wounded-in-Taliban-attack-against-two-Christian-churches-33719.html> - At least 14 people were killed and over 70 were wounded this morning in suicide attacks against two churches in Youhanabad, Lahore's Christian quarter, in Pakistan.

A spokesman for the Punjab police reported that the two churches, which are 500 metres apart, were St John's Catholic Church and Christ Church (Protestant).

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan Jamaatul Ahrar (TTP-JA) claimed responsibility for both attacks.

Initial reports indicate that, at the time of the explosions, 800 people were present in one church and 1,100 people in the other

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif condemned the blasts.

The death toll is constantly updated. Given the high number of wounded, the hospitals of Lahore called on residents to donate blood.

Christian schools in Karachi and Punjab announced that they will be closed tomorrow.

In Karachi, a demonstration got underway to protest against the attacks on the two churches.

The attackers decided to strike during Sunday services to achieve the most devastation.

According to eyewitnesses, two suicide bombers reached the gates of the two churches and tried to enter them. When they were stopped, they blew themselves up.

"We have carried out the attack," TTP JA spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan told *The Express Tribune*. "We have reached Lahore, the centre of Punjab province, which is a challenge and a warning to the rulers," Ehsan said.

Immediately after the attacks, a crowd gathered to protest the lack of police protection. A young man, thought to have been involved in one of the attacks, was lynched and burned alive by an angry mob.

More than 100,000 Christians live in the Youhanabad area.

Lahore is the capital of Punjab, Pakistan's most populous and richest province. The city is generally considered peaceful compared with many other areas of Pakistan.

Pakistan rally celebrates Charlie Hebdo attackers

AFP (13.01.2015) http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-01-13/news/58024547_1_blasphemy-pakistan-two-brothers - While last week's attack on French satirical magazine [Charlie Hebdo](#) sparked global outrage, dozens of people in Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar paid tribute Tuesday to the brothers who carried out the murders.

Though small in scale, the event was indicative of the anger that portrayals of the [Prophet Mohammed](#) can ignite in some parts of the Muslim world, particularly in Pakistan where tough blasphemy laws make insulting the Prophet a crime punishable by death.

Local cleric Maulana Pir Mohammad Chishti led some 60 people in prayers for [Cherif](#) and [Said Kouachi](#), who shot dead 12 people at the magazine's offices on January 7, as worshippers called the pair "martyrs".

They also chanted "Death to Hebdo publications" and "Long live Cherif Kouachi, long live Said Kouachi", and kissed posters of the brothers who were shot dead by police two days later.

"These two brothers have paid the debt of all Muslims in the world and we present them our salute and respect," Chishti said.

Aurangzeb Alhafi, professor of Islamic Studies at Punjab University in the eastern city of Lahore said he attended the prayers as a religious duty.

"If freedom of expression stops at the mention of the Holocaust, then it should also stop at the honour of our Prophet," Alhafi told AFP.

Fourteen people are languishing on death row in Pakistan for falling fall of its blasphemy laws, which rights groups say are used to persecute minorities and wage personal vendettas.

Mobs often take matters in their own hands and lynch those accused of blasphemy, and such killers are widely feted.

Charlie Hebdo meanwhile has announced it will defy the attackers by putting a cartoon of a weeping Prophet Mohammed on its next cover.

PM's ambitious action plan and minorities

Daily Times (08.01.2015) - The blasphemy law is continuously being misused against the minorities, with the recent beating and then burning alive in a brick kiln of Christian couple Shama and Shehzad being one of the worst examples.

After the deadly Taliban attack on the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar, Prime Minister (PM) Nawaz Sharif has announced an ambitious 20-point plan of action to eradicate extremism and terrorism from the country. It seems that eradicating extremism and terrorism from the country has become a top priority of the government but, unfortunately, the leaders of religious parties and madrassas (seminaries) are

already expressing their reservations. The media and some analysts are also expressing their suspicions, saying that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. I think this is because of the government's history of making big and tall claims but following them up with no action.

Similarly, instead of taking immediate and strong action against the Taliban and other extremists, the government has formed over a dozen committees and subcommittees but nothing concrete so far. Therefore, this is an opportunity for the government to amend its mistakes and change its citizens' and the world's perception about Pakistan. I am not sure if this atrocity has had any effect on our politicians but surely this attack on innocent children has changed the Pakistani public's opinion and they seem to be standing against the Taliban, growing extremism and terrorism.

The Pakistani government and politicians must understand this new trend and get the job done otherwise someone else will have to do it for them. Army chief General Raheel Sharif seems very clear in his vision and actions, and this is a clear signal for the politicians. It is therefore better for the government to try to understand the need of the hour and join forces with the army, making the most of this opportunity.

I am glad the PM has recognised the minorities' suffering, thus including point number nine on the action plan to ensure security for minorities in the country via the uprooting of extremism and terrorism. Pakistan's minorities, particularly Christians, have been suffering since its inception and living under constant fear for their lives. The majority of atrocities against them have been committed by extremist groups in Punjab. Although the PML-N leadership has in the past denied the existence of these groups and its links to them, the PM has now admitted it. However, taking action against them will not be easy as there are several hurdles to overcome.

The PML-N should not forget the role of the Christian leadership in Punjab. The province was achieved because of the Christian leadership's support but, unfortunately, now they are fleeing the country to save their lives. They have realised that their honour, worship places and their properties will not be protected. It is a great challenge for the Muslim League government, as the founder of Pakistan and the then head of the Muslim League had ensured equal citizenship rights to minorities. However, after the Quaid's death, no Muslim League government could keep his promises to the minorities. I am sorry that even after 67 years we have failed to consider minorities as equal citizens of the country. Instead, efforts are being made to expel them from Pakistan, the land their forefathers struggled for.

Recently, I saw Minister for Justice and Law Pervez Rasheed's statement that the 1973 Constitution ensured equal rights to all citizens of Pakistan and that there was no discrimination among Muslims and non-Muslims. There was no need to have separate laws for the minorities as they were equal citizens of the country. But I am afraid they have never been considered equal citizens of the county and the Constitution of Pakistan does not confer them equal status. We all know this reality and if Pervez Rasheed does not know it, or does not want to admit it, then the PM's plan for ensuring security to minorities is never going to be successful. This mindset has to be changed too.

Last year, the ex-Chief Justice of Pakistan, Justice Tassaduq Husain Jilani, ordered the constitution of a Council for Minorities' Rights (CMR) but, unfortunately, it is still pending. In November, the Supreme Court (SC) of Pakistan resumed a hearing related to the implementation of the SC's order of June 19, 2014 about a national council for minorities. Its function will be to monitor the practical realisation of the rights of and safeguards for minorities under the constitution and law. The council will also be mandated to frame policy recommendations for safeguarding and protecting minorities' rights by the provincial and federal governments. We heard some time ago that a consensus had been

reached between the government and opposition but still there is nothing. Also, I have doubts about whether minority groups have been consulted over this matter.

The blasphemy law is continuously being misused against the minorities, with the recent beating and then burning alive in a brick kiln of Christian couple Shama and Shehzad being one of the worst examples. The Punjab government formed a three-member committee and paid compensation to their children, who at this age need their parents more than money, but this has become a routine practice of the government. Instead of ensuring justice, treating the cause and introducing some deterrence, they simply pay the compensation and forget the rest. However, the SC has taken suo motu notice and the hearing is still ongoing. This has caused hope for justice to rise, but the government still has to work to stop the ongoing misuse of the law and to ensure security and protection to minorities.

Vigilante killings, attacks on churches, temples and minorities' properties and forced conversion are now an everyday matter. It is not just down to the blasphemy law but the use of it to demonstrate the growing hatred against religious minorities. If the PM really wants to protect and secure the minorities' future in Pakistan, minorities have to be recognised as equal citizens of Pakistan. We have to educate our present and coming generations about the minorities' and particularly Christians' role in the making of Pakistan.

I believe that the Pakistan Muslim League has a particular responsibility towards Christians and other religious minorities as they (Muslim League) consider themselves the true heir of Quaid-e-Azam. Unfortunately, they have lost the vision of Quaid about Pakistan and minorities too. The Quaid had several minority leaders around him, he was aware of minorities' issues and all of his struggles for a separate country were for the then Muslim minority of India. Other theories and slogans came afterwards.

The recognition of minorities' suffering is great, but just adding a point will not be enough. This is the time to take action to ensure security for the minorities. Recognising their services and role in the making of Pakistan would be a good start and this can be achieved by simply adding a chapter to school and college books. Legislation to ensure security and protection to minorities is also necessary, otherwise the PM's action plan will never be accomplished.
