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Ahmadis behind bars in Pakistan

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (22.08.2017) – Ahmadis are *persona non grata* in Pakistan (1). They are routinely arrested on false charges of blasphemy, kept for years in prison without any judgment or sentenced to several years of deprivation of freedom. As of August 2017, the following Ahmadis were in prison in Pakistan.

Ghulam Ahmad, Ihsan Ahmad Mubashir Ahmad

On 13th May 2014, a case was opened against these three Ahmadis from Bhoiwal (District Sheikhpura) at the Police Station Sharaqpur after someone tore down an anti-Ahmadi poster. A fourth Ahmadi who was involved the case was murdered three days later by a madrassah student while in police custody. They were all accused of violating Article 295-A (2) of the Pakistani Penal Code (PPC) on blasphemy. On 25th May 2017, they were refused bail by the Supreme Court. The bench hearing the case comprised three judges: Manzoor A. Malik, Sardar Tariq Masoor and Mazhar Sher. The three Ahmadis were arrested on 18th July 2014. They have been **in prison for the last three years without any judgment.**

Tahir Mahdi Imtiaz

Tahir Mahdi Imtiaz, who is the printer of the Ahmadiyya monthly *Ansarullah*, was arrested by the police on 30th March 2015 in the premises of a Lahore court where he had gone to seek confirmation of bail in another fabricated case registered with Millat Town police on behest of mullas, more than a year before.

In 2015, he was accused of

- Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs (PPC Section 295-A)
- Defiling, etc. of the Holy Qur'an (PPC Section 295-B)
- Use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet, punishable with life imprisonment or death (PPC Section 295-C)

He was also charged under the 1997 Anti-Terrorism Act, Article 8-W, which prohibits acts intended or likely to stir up sectarian hatred, including: using threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour, displaying, publishing, distributing, or possessing written material, visual images, or sounds, which are threatening, abusive or insulting. He will be tried by an anti-terror court.

He rejects all the accusations. He was denied bail. He has been **in prison since 2015 without any judgment.**

Qamar Ahmad Tahir

He was arrested on 20th November 2015 after a major arson attack in Jehlum by a mob on Pakistan Chip-board Factory which was owned by an Ahmadi and of which he was a security official (See pictures at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1221273>). The incident resulted in riots, extensive damage to Ahmadiyya property and massive flight of Ahmadis from the locality. The next day, a mob attacked the local Ahmadiyya mosque, set fire to its furnishings and occupied it. The police made some arrests but most of the attackers and arsonists were released on bail. On 1st July 2017, after 19 months of pre-trial detention, Mr Liaquat Ali Ranjha, Additional Session Judge, sentenced **Qamar Ahmad Tahir was sentenced to life imprisonment** for allegedly defiling the Holy Quran (PPC article 295-B) during the November 2015 events in Jehlum. He denies the charges.

Shakoor Bhai and Mazhar Abbas

On 2nd December 2015, officials of Punjab's Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) accompanied by a contingent of the Elite Force raided Shakoor Bhai's bookshop, arrested him as well as Mazhar Abbas, the shop assistant, a Shia. He was accused of selling religious books published by the Ahmadiyya Community. The books found in his store (including copies of the Holy Quran) were purely religious in nature and in no way incited or condoned the use of violence. Two days later, a speedy trial in an anti-terrorism court dispensed **five years' imprisonment** to each of the accused. **Shakoor**, 81, was sentenced **to three additional years in prison** under the anti-Ahmadiyya law.

Sabah ul Zafar and Idrees Ahmad

On 5th December 2016, twenty-eight armed police contingent of the Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) carried out a raid on Ahmadiyya central offices and Zia-ul-Islam Press in Rabwah. They arrested four Ahmadiyya officials. Two of them were released.

Sabah ul Zafar and Idrees Ahmad remained behind bars as bail was not granted to them. They were sentenced to **three years' imprisonment.**

Amjad Iqbal Salooni and Ikram Ilahi

These two Ahmadis were arrested on 15th March 2017 for preaching their faith. They were charged under Article 295-A and 298-C of the PPC. A judge added terrorism clauses to the case and set it to an anti-terrorism court. Their pleas for bail were rejected. On 31st May 2017, a judge in Faisalabad sentenced them to **three years in prison.**

1. In 1974, Prime Minister Bhutto amended the Pakistani Constitution to declare Ahmadis non-Muslims. Then, in 1984, under General Zia, the Government of Pakistan enacted Ordinance XX that made it a criminal offence for Ahmadis to call themselves Muslims, to call their place of worship a 'mosque', to use the Islamic greeting 'Assalamo alaikum' (Peace be on you) and to preach or propagate their faith. Any of the above acts is punishable by three years imprisonment or by death if convicted under the blasphemy laws.

2. Pakistan Penal Code, Chapter XV: Offences relating to religion

295. Injuring or defiling place of worship, with Intent to insult the religion of any class: Whoever destroys, damages or defiles any place of worship, or any object held sacred by any class of persons with the intention of thereby insulting the religion of any class of persons or with the knowledge that any class of persons is likely to consider such destruction damage or defilement as an insult to their religion. shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to two years, or with fine, or with both.

295-A. Deliberate and malicious acts Intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting Its religion or religious beliefs: Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the 'religious feelings of any class of the citizens of Pakistan, by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representations insults the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, or with fine, or with both. Sec. 295-A ins. by the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, XXV of 1927.

295-B. Defiling, etc., of Holy Qur'an : Whoever willfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Qur'an or of an extract therefrom or uses it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life. Sec. 295-B added by P.P.C. (Amendment) Ordinance, I of 1982.

295-C. Use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet: 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 Muhammad (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine. Sec. 295-C ins. by the Criminal Law (amendment) Act, 111 of 1986, S. 2

Source: <http://www.oecd.org/site/adboecdanti-corruptioninitiative/46816797.pdf>

Islamabad High Court suggests tougher punishment for blasphemy law abusers

CLAASS (21.08.2017) - www.claas.org.uk - The Islamabad High Court has suggested tackling the misuse of the blasphemy law by imposing the same punishment for those who misuse it or make false allegations, as the offence would attract.

Justice Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui also ordered the ban of Facebook in case the website management does not conform to Pakistani laws.

In March the court had issued a short order on a petition seeking blasphemous content being removed from social media.

In his judgement Justice Siddiqui said it was better to stop the blasphemy law from being exploited, instead of abolishing it.

He also explained how people use the blasphemy law to falsely implicate those whom they have personal grudge with.

However, under the existing law, the false accuser can only face proceedings under Section 182 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC).

Nasir Saeed, Director CLAAS-UK welcomed the Islamabad High Court's judgement about amending the blasphemy law.

He said it is very unfortunate that despite being aware of the misuse of the law by people to take revenge and settle personal scores, with the very recent example of Mashal Khan, the government has failed to bring this law to parliament and amend it appropriately.

Mr Saeed said: "Although there is a long-standing demand from human rights organisations to repeal this law which is being widely misused, because of the government inadvertence it has become a very sensitive issue and even demanding change in the blasphemy law is considered blasphemy itself.

"But this is another opportunity for the government to bring this matter to parliament and have a debate to reach some positive conclusion."

He added that to stop its misuse, the government needs to introduce tough punishments for false accusers as the current punishment is very minor, especially as most of the time people take the law into their own hands and decide the fate of the accused, which normally leads to the killing of innocent people.

The justice system is also slow and provides no protection. Several people have been killed in police custody and if the case goes to court, it takes years to decide, leaving innocent people to suffer needlessly.

Ranjha Masih spent eight and a half years in prison before he was proved innocent and Asia Bibi has been languishing in prison from 1991. Her case is due to be heard by the supreme court of Pakistan but despite an early hearing appeal by her lawyer, there is still no sign that her case will be heard in the near future.

According to some reports, at least 80 people charged over alleged blasphemy offences have been killed, while dozens are languishing in jails because of false blasphemy accusations against them.

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About CLAAS:

Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS) is an interdenominational organisation working for Christians who are being persecuted because of their faith in Pakistan. CLAAS works for religious freedom, to stop persecution of Christians in Pakistan because of blasphemy and other discriminatory laws, raise awareness, disseminate information and highlight the plight of Christians on an international level. CLAAS provides free legal aid to victims of religious intolerance in Pakistan, as well as shelter and financial support for the victims and their families.

70 years after Pakistan's founding, what PM's recent ousting means for minorities

By Asif Aqeel

World Watch Monitor (14.08.2017) - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/08/70-years-pakistans-founding-pms-recent-ousting-means-minorities/> - Pakistan celebrates its 70th birthday today (14 August). And there's a new Prime Minister after Nawaz Sharif,

founder of the largest political party, was disqualified by the apex court on 29 July on charges of not being "righteous" and "ameen"*.

This Supreme Court decision about Sharif "will throw the governing party and the country at large into turmoil ahead of elections due next year", according to the [Guardian](#) newspaper.

Former cricket star Imran Khan, chairman of the opposition party he founded (Tehreek-e-Insaaf, PTI), filed the corruption charges against Sharif with the head of the right-wing party Jamaat-e-Islami, Siraj-ul-Haq.

Both PTI and Jamaat-e-Islami are [accused of being close to the military establishment](#), the most organised and ordered institution in the country. However, these claims are rejected by former PTI central executive committee member Brigadier (r) Samson Simon Sharaf who said the accusations were nothing more than an effort to create a rift among state institutions and so destabilise the country.

Pakistan has had a bumpy ride of democracy, with three military coups – lasting more than 30 years – since its independence exactly 70 years ago in 1947.

Nawaz Sharif was disqualified under Article 62 of Pakistan's Constitution, which requires that parliamentarians are "sadiq" (the same Hebrew word [tsadeq](#) is translated as "just" and "righteous" in the Bible) and "ameen", an Arabic word [loosely translated as "truthful"](#).

These Islamic terms were introduced by [military dictator General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq](#) (1977 to 1988), who was mainly responsible for Islamising Pakistan and introducing blasphemy laws, Islamic *hadd* punishments and even [making divorce laws for Christians more stringent](#) (after which they mostly converted to Islam for dissolution of marriage).

But Sharif's ousting, based on Islamic terms introduced by a dictator, has developed sympathy for him in a sizeable number of the educated liberal left. Leading this section is none other than former Supreme Court Bar Association President and UN Rapporteur on human rights, Asma Jehangir, held in high esteem abroad but considered highly controversial inside the country.

"It is a populist judgment, which has opened the doors for the disqualification of politicians on flimsy grounds. It is highly flawed in procedure and substance," Jehangir [told the Washington Post](#).

Brigadier Sharaf says all this is only false propaganda of "international agents" which have deep penetration in Pakistan. He says some Pakistani media sections and organisations are controlled from abroad.

Pakistani Christians

Sharif's political party, [Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz](#) (PML-N), a centre-right party which is currently the ruling and largest political party in Pakistan, has a history of supporting Islamisation.

Christians comprise little more than 1.5 per cent (3 to 5 million) of a 200 million-strong population. The country has stringent blasphemy laws and religious minorities are nowhere in the political and social strata.

Brigadier Sharaf told World Watch Monitor that all incidents of communal violence against Christians took place during Nawaz's tenure because of his ties with the banned outfit Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ).

"The LeJ does not feel content until it kills a few people. This is their diet, you know! And above all, the blasphemy law of 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, which Christians dread most, was made most stringent during Nawaz's tenure in 1991," he said.

Senator Farhat Ullah Babar, a senior politician from the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), says that the Nawaz government was not known for upholding minorities' rights. "In cases like arson attacks on Christian neighbourhoods, investigation and trial were not pursued as vigorously as they should have been," he said.

"But Sharif's ousting will weaken Parliament and elected members, which means the rights of all sections of society tend to be weakened. Because minorities are the most vulnerable section, so their rights are also undermined."

National Assembly Women Parliamentary Caucus general secretary Shaista Pervaiz, in the PML-N, says terrorism hits the entire country and attaching its consequences to a certain political party is not appropriate. "The volatile situation in the country has hit every community irrespective of their religion or belief," she told World Watch Monitor.

Ms Pervaiz says Sharif's ousting may affect the already ongoing pro-religious minority policies, but she hopes there will be no fallout. "That is why we say that the democratic system should be allowed to continue – and such hiccups hamper progress," she said.

Despite its previous record, the PML-N has [endeavoured to acquire a more moderate face](#) in recent years with a "softer" view of religious minorities.

India is considered an archenemy of Pakistan, while "a Hindu" and "an Indian" are interchangeable terms, which is why the Hindu community (mainly in Sindh) has a largely ignored and obscured life. Though, to everyone's surprise, [Sharif went to a Diwali programme](#) in November 2015, where he said: "You are residents of Pakistan. Every resident of Pakistan, no matter who it is, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian and Parsi ... belongs to me, and I belong to them.. If any Hindu is victimised, and the aggressor is a Muslim, I will take action against the Muslim. This is what my religion teaches me."

In a similar vein, Nawaz's younger brother, Shahbaz Sharif, who's Chief Minister of the biggest province Punjab, [wrote in March](#): "An egalitarian, tolerant, and peaceful polity where non-Muslim minorities enjoy religious freedoms and a complete sense of security is the answer to all our challenges."

The Daily Ummat, a conservative newspaper, headlined on 31 July that Sharif's ousting was the result of the [hanging of Mumtaz Qadri in February 2016](#), on the Supreme Court's orders, for killing Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer.

A bureaucrat also privately told World Watch Monitor that the hanging caused a loss to PMN-L of hundreds of thousands of votes. On terms of anonymity, he said that, due to this unpopular decision, Sharif's party would suffer a backlash in the 2018 elections.

Brigadier Sharaf, however, says Qadri's hanging brought a good number of Barelvis, [chief supporters of the blasphemy laws](#), to the strict school of thought of the Deobandis.

Taseer was in the [PPP](#) (considered a left-wing, socialist and progressive party) but the PPP did not have the courage to rule on Qadri's appeal between 2008-2013, and left the job for the next government.

This in turn means there seems little hope that the Supreme Court will pick up [Asia Bibi's](#) case again (Asia Bibi is a Christian woman on death row for blasphemy). The Lahore High Court had requested that Parliament amend legal loopholes it [identified in 2014](#), but no government has requested this.

'Religious minorities can swing 2018 election'

It is yet to be seen how minorities will be given more inclusive participation in the 2018 elections.

The PTI is considered a "burger-class" – which to an ordinary Pakistani means "a more educated, tech-savvy bourgeoisie", while the PML-N has been accused by the PTI of involvement in "theft" and "land grabbing" and being composed of "illiterates".

Although the PPP is considered socialist and progressive, it nationalised educational institutions, including Christian missionary ones, in early 1970, greatly harming the community. The 1973 Constitution, enforced during a PPP government, requires the country's President be a Muslim. The PPP enacted an 18th Amendment in 2010 to require that the Prime Minister must also be Muslim.

But Farhat Ullah Babar says the PPP has learnt from its past mistakes. "In the past, it succumbed under pressure from the religious right. But we have learned if you give an inch to the religious right, it will demand a mile," he said.

In the 2013 elections, the [Taliban openly threatened to attack the PPP and other secular parties](#), but signalled to Khan's PTI and Sharif's PML-N to openly hold gatherings and continue their campaigns without fear. In this scenario, the N-League bagged the highest votes and the [PTI stood only second in the elections](#). (Khan declared the long war with the Taliban in the troubled northern hilly areas as ["someone else's war"](#) and advocated negotiation, after which he was nicknamed ["Taliban Khan"](#).)

On the other side of the political spectrum is Jamiat-Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl, whose head Maulana Fazlur Rehman, [himself very close to the Taliban](#), has repeatedly called Khan an agent [of the Western and "Jewish" lobby](#), who ["drives youths to obscenity"](#).

Since Khan's heyday as Pakistan's cricket team's captain, Pakistani Christians have believed he is prejudiced, having never allowed a Christian to reach the national cricket team.

"By temperament Imran believes there should be no 'minorities' in Pakistan. He believes that Pakistan should be an equal-opportunity country," says Brigadier Sharaf. He says he gave Imran Khan a plan to mainstream religious minorities from 2007 to 2011 but it hasn't been implemented until now: a main reason why Sharaf has now intellectually distanced himself from the PTI. "Any party that truly co-opts Hindus and Christians into the mainstream will emerge victorious, because in 60 to 70 constituencies their vote could swing results. I briefed Khan but he didn't take my advice," he said.

In this political tug of war, of the three main parties – PML-N, PPP and PTI – it remains to be seen how they give actual representation to religious minorities – since all three claim to be defenders of religious minorities.

Pakistan is 4th on the [Open Doors 2017 World Watch List](#) of the 50 countries in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

**An Arabic Islamic term which equates to "truthful", kept in Arabic though the Constitution is written in English.*

Pakistan's 70 years and its minorities

Quaid-e-Azam and his companions were enlightened and firm believers of modern democracy. But soon after the death of the Quaid, the Parliament passed a divisive Objectives Resolution and Pakistan began its journey towards an Islamic state

By Nasir Saeed

Daily Times (14.08.2017) - <http://dailytimes.com.pk/opinion/14-Aug-17/pakistans-70-years-and-its-minorities> - We are celebrating Pakistan's 70th Independence Day. We have travelled a long way but, in all these years, among many other things we have not been able to decide whether Quaid-e-Azam wanted Pakistan to be an Islamic or a secular state.

Proponents of both sides have valid arguments, but we have failed to reach a unanimous agreement. We haven't been able to establish our national narrative, an important clause of the National Action Plan against terrorism. Early this year, ex-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif tried to raise a consensus, but failed.

At Independence, religious minorities were 23 percent of Pakistan's population, the share has since reduced to a mere three percent

I fail to understand how and where our priorities of national interest are set. Nations that gained independence around the same time as Pakistan are doing much better than us, especially politically.

Quaid-e-Azam and his companions were enlightened and firm believers of modern democracy. But soon after the death of the Quaid, the Parliament passed a divisive Objectives Resolution and Pakistan began its journey towards an Islamic state. Many intellectuals still believe that was a mistake but nobody has tried to rectify it.

In 1973 Constitution, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto made Islam our state religion. Later, Ziaul Haq cut minorities from the political mainstream and made them 2nd class citizens of the

country through a separate electoral system for them. This was totally against the Quaid-e-Azam's vision.

Religious minorities, and especially Christians who supported Quaid-e-Azam in his struggle for Pakistan, have time and again manifested their loyalty and sincerity. Post-independence they played a vital role in the development of the country, but today they feel ignored and the most vulnerable community in Pakistan.

At Independence, religious minorities were 23 percent of Pakistani population, the share has since reduced to a mere three percent. All of our prime ministers and presidents have recognised and praised minorities' services for Pakistan, but this praise has been nothing more than political rhetoric.

Schools and colleges run by Christian missions have played a significant role in educating the Pakistani nation. Several prominent bureaucrats and politicians have been educated at such schools and colleges, which were nationalised in 1972 by the Bhutto government. Though many institutions were later returned to their original owners, there are still several Christian schools and colleges that remain under government control.

The founder of Pakistan had called for equal citizenship status for religious minorities. He even set an example by appointing Joginder Nath Mandal as the new country's law minister and Sir Zafar Ullah Khan as its foreign minister.

But instead of following in the Quaid's footsteps, our politicians and government have passed discriminatory policies and laws against them, under which they feel insecure and are living in fear.

Therefore, a large number of Hindus and Christians continue to flee the country, the Anglo-Indian Christian community has almost vanished from Lahore while Goans Christians continue to shrink in Karachi.

Government institutions are openly pursuing discriminatory policies and preaching hate against minorities, even forcing them to do the least respected and most menial jobs. In recent years, I have seen several discriminatory jobs adverts despite Pakistani Constitution's Article 27 providing safeguards against discrimination in services (employment).

We are a nation that is teaching and promoting hatred and intolerance against non-Muslims (our own citizens) in our school and colleges. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) published a detailed research report on this issue. Apart from Pakistani minorities, several international organisations have expressed their concerns. But it is all falling on deaf ears. Politicians who enter the Parliament on reserved seats for religious minorities are widely considered subservient to their national political party leadership.

For almost 25 years, minority communities have been demanding dual voting rights and according to some reports, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto had agreed to this suggestion. She also promised to change the blasphemy law, but was ousted from power before she could fulfil her promise.

The blasphemy law is considered a root cause of minorities' persecution, and its misuse is widespread in the country. Christians consider themselves targets of this law, demonstrated by several churches being attacked and several Christian towns and villages, like Sanglahill, Gojra, and Joseph Colony, being burnt. Early this month Christians marked Gojra's 8th anniversary where eight people were burnt alive. In the same year a judicial inquiry report was prepared and submitted to the government by Mr Justice Iqbal Hameedur Rehman. He made several recommendations to stop the communal violence and chalked out certain objective guidelines for the protection minority rights but all of that has remained in vain.

Forced conversion of Christian and Hindu girls is another issue and several national NGOs have published detailed reports on it. The media has also reported several cases but it does not seem enough to attract the federal government's attention. Even when the Sindh assembly passed legislation to stop forced conversion, the governor refused to sign the bill.

There is no doubt that minorities have been suffering for decades. The government, politicians, and even the judiciary are aware of the situation. In 2014, the Supreme Court ordered the establishment of a task force for the protection of minorities, as well as a national commission for minority rights. The order has yet to be implemented.

Several international organisations and countries consider Pakistan a dangerous country for minorities and have raised their concerns with our government.

The world has changed but we are still trying to live in medieval times. Religious minorities see no future in Pakistan. We need to change our political and social culture to ensure equality, security and protection for our minorities. It is time to take appropriate steps to make Pakistan progressive and enlightened as envisioned by the founder Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

Controversies around the kidnapping and killing of two Chinese Christians by ISIS in Pakistan

HRWF (27.07.2017) - In June, the Islamic State killed two Chinese Christians it kidnapped in Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan province a month before, according to the militant group's Amaq news agency.

Armed men pretending to be policemen kidnapped Lee Zingyang (24) from Hunan and Meng Lisi (26) from Hubei in Central China, in the provincial capital, Quetta, on 24th May. The kidnapping was a rare security incident involving Chinese nationals in Pakistan, where Beijing has pledged \$57 billion for its "Belt and Road" plan.

After the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the killings, Pakistan's Interior Ministry said the two Chinese nationals were "actually engaged in preaching" after they went to Quetta "under the garb of learning (the) Urdu language from a Korean national."

Official Chinese media said they were working for Seo Jun-won, a Korean missionary, and China would cooperate with Pakistan on any investigations into "illegal evangelization."

An official from South Korea's foreign ministry rejected these allegations.

The comments from Seoul deepen the mystery behind the abduction and deaths of the two Chinese.

Pakistani Christian boy, 16, charged with blasphemy for discussing his faith

World Watch Monitor (19.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2tqCqUD> - A 16-year-old Pakistani Christian boy has been charged with blasphemy for talking with a colleague about his belief in Jesus, the second such incident in a month.

Shahzad Masih, 16, a cleaner at a hospital in the city of Dinga (near the religiously conservative city of Gujrat), was arrested on 13 July after his colleague, Ishtiaq Ahmed Jalali, accused him of insulting Islam's prophet Muhammad, a crime punishable with death in Pakistan.

A month earlier, on 15 June, Ashfaq Masih, 28, was arrested in the nearby city of Lahore for saying he believed Jesus to be the final prophet.

The latest incident took place at the Shameem Riaz Polyclinic. Jalali, who works at the hospital pharmacy, is a member of Tehreek-e-Tahfuz-e-Islam Pakistan, an organisation that strives to protect the name and honour of Muhammad. It belongs to the Bareilvi school of Islamic thought, which is considered "moderate" and has even faced criticism from other Muslims for its "polytheism" of worshipping at shrines. Barelvis are known for the special respect they afford to Muhammad – more so than any other Islamic school of thought – and are chief supporters of Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

Shahzad Masih's father, Shafaqat, who works as a labourer, told World Watch Monitor that the argument related to who Christians worship.

"My son told him that we follow Jesus and then their discussion became sour, at which point a doctor intervened and calmed them down," he said.

The police complaint was lodged by another man, Nadeem Ahmed, who claims to have called Shahzad Masih from his mobile phone repair shop, which is beside the hospital, to ask him about what he'd said. In his report, Ahmed states that Masih repeated his "abusive words" against Muhammad and then fled.

Police reports in Pakistan, called First Information Reports (FIR), are often key in court cases, though the veracity of the claims in such reports is often the subject of contention.

Shafaqat Masih says that two days prior to the lodging of the FIR, his son's colleague, Ishtiaq Jalali, told his son that Christians worship at the shrines of Muslim sages.

"My son told him that he didn't know about this and he would ask me about it," Shafaqat Masih said. "Then on 13 July, I was at work when he called me at around 4pm. He had returned from hospital but they asked him to come to the mobile phone repair shop, which is in front of the hospital.

"I told him that it would take me some time to get there, so he should call his uncle, Rifaqat, whom I also called on the phone to go to him. I arrived at around 7pm at the hospital, where they all had gathered. We tried to intervene, but they did not let us talk. Then they told us that they did not want to make the matter public and wanted to settle it amicably. At the same time, they kept calling others to join them and a large number of clerics gathered while we three were all alone [Shahzad, his father and uncle].

"One of the clerics told me that the head of a nearby madrassah had called them to the madrassah to settle the matter, after which the entire mob went there.

"[His uncle] Rifaqat and I also went there, but I sent Rifaqat to go inside along with Shahzad, who they had in their custody. The leader of the group argued that the crime committed by Shahzad was punishable with death alone. While they were discussing this,

two police vans arrived. The chief policeman asked for Shahzad, but they were reluctant to give him up and only handed him over on the promise that the decision would be taken the next morning. As I was standing outside, I saw the police taking Shahzad along with them, but since then they haven't allowed us to see him."

The police chief, Shahbaz Hinjra, told a local newspaper that Masih was in their custody and that they were investigating the matter.

Former Punjab parliamentarian Tahir Naveed Chaudhry, leader of the largest Christian political party, told World Watch Monitor that he had personally investigated the matter and found that initial argument had centred over Shahzad Masih's colleague's attempts to convert him to Islam.

"When our people try to defend themselves and their faith then often it becomes an issue and later such cases are lodged," he said.

One of Jalali's relatives, Muhammad Saqib Shakeel Jalali, a leader of Tehreek-e-Tahfuz-e-Islam Pakistan, told a local TV station a day after Masih's arrest: "If the blasphemer is acquitted of the charge then each member of our organisation would attack him."

Masih's father says he and his family have been on the run ever since. "We don't even know what to eat and where to live," he said.

His uncle, Razaqat, told World Watch Monitor that there are about 25 Christian families in the area and no such incident had ever taken place before.

The Tehreek-e-Tahfuz-e-Islam Pakistan website claims that no suspect has yet been awarded the death penalty under Pakistan's blasphemy laws, even though the Christian woman Asia Bibi has been on death row for blasphemy since 2010. The website also says that liberal Muslims want to amend the current blasphemy law and must be stopped – a key reason for the organisation's founding 10 years ago. In April, a Muslim student was beaten to death in the city of Mardan following an accusation of blasphemy.

Several blasphemy cases have been registered before in Gujrat, one of the most conservative areas of the Punjab province. In August 2015, 15 Christians were accused of blasphemy after they used the word "apostle" to describe a pastor who had died years before. Then in July 2016, a Christian man was accused of blasphemy after a religious argument on the messaging service WhatsApp. Both cases are still pending in the court.

Televised UK parliamentary debate on Christian persecution brings hope for change

British Pakistani Christian Association (04.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2to9gT5> - Today a much awaited debate on Christian Persecution was held at Westminster Hall - surprisingly it was held by a large number of MPs. The last time a debate like this was held was around five years ago and many believe it was long overdue.

The event was championed by MP Jim Shannon of the DUP who is of course Chairman of the All Parliamentary Party for International Religious Freedom and was presided over by MP Hanson Shadow Police and Justice Minister and also Shadow Treasury Minister.

Dame Caroline Spelman who is Second Church Estates Commissioner questioned the role of Foreign Office in particular Embassies in preserving religious freedom. She questioned the Foreign Minister:

"For the Foreign Office religious freedom is a priority but what does that mean in practice? There are guidelines for embassies around the world about what they should do to promote religious freedom.

"What percentage of embassy funds that can be spent on local projects are used for projects on freedom of religious belief? Christians are increasingly being persecuted around the world, often in countries where we are very significant donors of aid."

Dame Spelman also raised concerns about Taimoor Raza who recently was charged with blasphemy and sentenced to death, after engaging in a debate on facebook with a person named Muhammed Usman, who later turned out to be a Pakistani counter-terrorism agent. The problem arose over a sectarian argument based on Mr Raza's Shia sensitivities and the majority Sunni view. Mr Raza has now been sentenced to death the harshest penalty thus far given out for a Blasphemy law victim in Pakistan.

MP Lisa Cameron shared a wonderful anecdote about visiting an Amish community in Pennsylvania and used that to explain the need for tolerance of all faiths right across the world. She expressed the joy and fascination of learning about new cultures and faiths that should be a shared feeling for all.

Regarding the role of DFID MP Cameron described a visit to Lebanon where money was being used to help the most vulnerable refugees. Evidence was heard of the fear Christians face of living in refugee camps due to existing persecution. She said:

"Many do not go to refugee camps because they fear they will be discriminated against or attacked."

MP Cameron asked the Foreign Minister what percentage of Christians benefit from relocation programmes with UNHCR, for which Britain is a contributor.

MP Chris Bryant a former priest seemed at odds with the goals of the meeting. He sought the foreign office to focus on alleviating world poverty and ensuring a continuation of the agreed 0.7% UN target for international aid for which Britain was reported as only one of six countries in the world to achieve. He set no priority on tackling Christian persecution.

MP Andrew Selous who is a Director of the Conservative Christian Fellowship, spoke of the Open Doors Worldwatch list which he keeps posted in his office. He highlighted persecution in several countries mentioning Pakistan in his address and suggesting churches in the constituencies of MP's should maintain the Worldwatch list so that they remember to pray for the suffering church.

MP Patricia Gibson, said:

"...the freedom of religion to worship God should be an absolute right....to compromise on religious freedom is a threat to all the freedoms of that particular society."

She described persecution in North Korea where she estimated 300,000 Christians are labelled enemies of state. She commented on how society in North Korea 'looks like something straight out of a George Orwell novel'. She went on to describe how in Somalia converting out of Islam is illegal. Moreover Al shabab want to rid somalia of Christians and kill those suspected of being Christian on the spot.

MP Gibson spoke of 300,000 Christians residing in Iraq living under the threat of being beheaded and killed by IS. Public executions of Christians were used for terror propaganda. MP Gibson moved onto the 1.25 million Christians residing in Saudi Arabia where conversion is punishable by death. India was listed by her as a nation with a poor record for human rights that persecutes its 59 million Christians. the 900,000 Christians in Qatar were also highlighted as being under the yoke of persecution.

She estimated the existence of 5.3 Million Christians in Pakistan, where women and children are subjected to sexual abuse and blasphemy laws are being used to attack Christian churches. She also described Moldova where owning a bible can lead to a prison sentence and being Christian loses you your nationality. MP Gibson, said:

"Western media does not cover stories for fear of disturbing cultural sensibilities.

"In the area of religious freedom there is no room for cultural sensibilities", she added.

MP Chris Matheson was surprised to see Columbia and Mexico on a list for Christian persecution. "I asked why that it is - it seems there is a problem with organised criminals targeting religious groups, particularly church groups in rural areas. They use necessary violence that organised criminals must resort to such as extortion and its such like to get their way," he said.

"I would say simply to the minister that there is absolutely a role, surely, for the uk to help develop civil society structures within these countries to help with law enforcement - to take on organised crime in areas where we have experience."

David Lindon a recently elected MP spoke of a Christian majority in Tanzania who are being persecuted in areas where Muslim majorities exist. he asked for dialogue with the Tanzanian Government to ensure vulnerable Christians are protected. He described persecution in Saudi Arabia as 'one of the most dangerous places to worship Jesus Christ'.

He said:

"Saudi Arabia remains one of her majesty's closet allies... Britain is far to quick to lower its flag at half mast upon the death of Saudi monarchs yet seldom does a day go by without the brutality of state sponsored torture and human rights abuses and murder by Saudi authorities but no flags in those cases are lowered.

"What exactly is the UK getting in a relationship with the Saudis other than arms sales?in the case of Saudi Arabia the British Government isn't just turning another cheek they are turning a blind eye."

MP Linden also mentioned persecution in India, Nigeria and Chechnya and said in the case of news about Pakistan that 'it was essential for the Government to hear it'.

MP Liz McInnes listed the four worst countries to live as a Christian: North Korea, Iran, Sudan and Pakistan. She spoke about Taimoor Raza and how she wrote to the Foreign Minister about his case and was advised that the Foreign Office is calling for Pakistan to honour its commitment to human rights. Liz McInnes also reiterated concerns

about 'Christians refugees being reluctant to go to refugee camps where they should be seeking help but fear discrimination and violence.'

Mark Field, Minister of State for the Foreign Office confirmed that £758,000 pounds is being spent on Freedom Religion projects which includes work in Pakistan and Iraq. He also explained that Foreign Office diplomats lobby governments across the globe on a regular basis.

In a bizarre statement he said in regards to Taimoor Raza: "...the reality is that such sentences are commuted to life imprisonment." Which to most of us does not seem like much of a gift or anything worth the mention.

He continued his address and said:

"Pakistan is our second largest recipient of foreign aid from DFID and I would be reluctant to withdraw from any aid or development programme on the basis of what's discussed here today.

"Freedom of religion however must be integral part of any ongoing aid and development work. Through our diplomatic channels between London and Islamabad we will make sure that the Pakistani Government are made well aware of what we regard as not only our priorities but their responsibilities under DFID expenditure."

He spoke of a visit to ancient Christian villages in Palmyra saying 'I shudder to think what has happened to them.'

"Where Freedom of Religious beliefs are being attacked so are other rights. In Pakistan the foreign secretary continues to fight for the rights of all minorities. We have provided £165 million pounds of aid to Iraq since 2014. We have also Continued to provide assistance as part of a 67 strong coalition fighting against Daesh..

Jim Shannon a long term campaigner for protection of the ever increasing Christians being persecuted across the globe. Closed by thanking all the participants and then shared a bible verse from John 14.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Matthew 5:10.

After watching the enthralling debate, Wilson Chowdhry, Chairman of the British Pakistani Christian Association, said:

"An amazing thing happened today Christian MP's put aside cultural sensitivities and boldly expressed their disgust and concerns about the millions of Christians facing persecution across the globe.

"It is no surprise to me and many followers of the BPCA that Pakistan was mentioned by every MP that spoke at Westminster hall, barring MP Gary Bryant who seemed to have walked into the wrong room. It is for pertinent reasons that Open Doors in the Worldwatch list have named Pakistan as the fourth worst nation in the world to live as a Christian.

"Sadly for me despite a clear acceptance by MP's that persecution exists in Pakistan, our Foreign office have never endorsed this fact - meaning a large majority of Christians who escape Pakistan fail asylum cases.

"In stating that he would not be willing to terminate current foreign aid spending priorities based on the discussion today, MP Mark Field gave a wonderful boon to any Pakistani officials listening in on the debate. To them it must seem that they can continue the poor governance and intentional mismanagement of their country that I believe is aimed at causing maximum distress to minorities, whilst creating enough instability to keep funds flowing from our unsuspecting UK government."

Pakistan expels South Korean for 'illegal preaching' after murder of Chinese 'missionaries'

Pakistan has ordered a South Korean man to leave the country, accusing him of involvement in "illegal preaching activities", after two of his students at an Urdu-language school were abducted and killed by the Islamic State group, which claimed they had been secretly preaching Christianity.

World Watch Monitor (21.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2tbMuJy> - "Investigations have revealed that [Juan Won-seo] went to Pakistan on a business visa, set up an Urdu academy in Quetta and got involved in illegal preaching activities," Pakistan's interior minister told UCAN on 19 June. "We have revoked his visa and asked him to leave the country".

A South Korean official had previously denied the claim, telling the Hindustan Times on 14 June that "nothing has so far been found to verify the suspicion that they were involved with a Korean missionary group".

Lee Zingyang, 24, and Meng Lisi, 26, went missing last month in Quetta, capital of Pakistan's impoverished Balochistan province. IS claimed responsibility for their deaths on 8 June.

Pakistan's interior ministry previously said the Chinese pair had travelled to Quetta "under the garb of learning [the] Urdu language from a Korean national" but were "actually engaged in preaching".

Lee and Meng were part of a dozen Chinese nationals attending Urdu classes, though Chinese media reported that the school and language exchange was "merely a front for conducting religious activities".

A Chinese student interviewed by the government-sanctioned English-language newspaper, The Global Times, said South Korea "recruits young people in China" and "sends teenagers to conduct missionary activities in Muslim countries... Compared to Chinese, more South Koreans have been killed abroad due to risky missionary activities in conservative Islamic regions. Some Chinese voluntarily join in the dangerous missionary activities in countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq after being converted by South Koreans."

According to the Hindustan Times, the move to blame South Korean missionaries for allegedly "misleading and misguiding" Chinese youngsters into preaching Christianity in foreign countries was meant to "mislead the Chinese people".

"Most Chinese Christians have become Christian through Chinese evangelists. It has been very difficult for foreign citizens to proselytise in China. China does not have a visa category for religious clergy or missionaries. Some foreign students, professionals and business people may do evangelistic work within China, but evangelistic activities are

restricted," Yang Fenggang, director of the Centre on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University, told the Indian newspaper.

Carsten T. Vala, from the department of political science at Loyola University, Maryland, added: "Chinese nationals are themselves quite active in foreign missionary work and in my more than ten years of interviews of Chinese Christians, I found a number of Chinese Christians who were eager to go abroad as missionaries. At least one Chinese church leader I interviewed reported that his congregation had sent missionaries to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other Arabic-speaking countries."

Yang said that "even if it was found that the two Chinese were preaching Christianity, it's the IS terrorists who should be blamed for their deaths".

An increasing number of Chinese have settled in Quetta, as part of the \$57bn China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, which aims to re-establish a flourishing Silk Road between the two countries. China was quick to say that, while the "atrocities" were "appalling", "it cannot drive a wedge between China and Pakistan, nor will the construction of the CPEC be disrupted".

Muslim university the first to host a church in Pakistan

Catholic employees and students will soon be able to worship on campus.

La Croix (08.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2sUYJ00> - In a corner of the University of Agriculture Faisalabad (UAF), a large banner at the entrance of a Christian area is emblazoned with the photos of a Catholic bishop and a picture of St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church. Additionally, the banner says "Let us make a house for the Lord."

While most Pakistani universities host mosques, UAF will be the first to allow a church on its campus. An area has been set aside near the quarters of 70 Christian university employees, most of them working as sanitary workers, gardeners and support staff.

For Farrukh Habib, UAF music teacher, this is a dream come true.

"This will be the first Muslim university to have a minority place of worship. Now our children can access catechism right on their doorstep. Christian students are happy too. We thank both the university administration and the diocese," Habib told ucanews.com.

"Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba, the largest student union in the country usually oppose cultural activities in other universities but here they respect us," he said.

More than 400 Christians in UAF celebrated when Bishop Joseph Arshad of Faisalabad, together with the Muslim Vice Chancellor of UAF, laid the church foundation stone on May 16.

Faisalabad Diocese will contribute 300,000 rupees (US\$4,500) toward the project whose total cost is estimated at 7.6 million rupees. The university has allotted over a square kilometer for the church construction.

Established in 1906 as the first major institution of higher agricultural education in the undivided Punjab, UAF houses more than 20 mosques and has separate hostels for women and men.

The challenges

According to Habib, it was not easy to get the plan approved. "In the 1990s, we submitted a request for a church building but the administration did not agree. There were no lawns in the proposed plan but now a clean environment will also benefit the worshippers," said Habib.

Back then, UAF employees said the dirt ground near their homes must be transformed as well as the church being built. "We need lawns as a venue to hold church programs as well as arrange marriages in our community," Habib said.

Bishop Arshad held a ground-breaking ceremony for the campus church in 2015 but the project still stalled. Bishop Arshad said it took him another three years to negotiate with university officials.

"We had to work hard as many officers kept delaying our proposal," Bishop Arshad said. "Finally, we have great news for the whole Christian community in Pakistan. This is a landmark for the diocese."

Chapels in government-run health or educational facilities are a rare phenomenon in Pakistan which has suffered terrorism and religious fundamentalism for decades.

Most of the incidents of mob attacks and suicide bombings on Sunday worshipers have been reported in Punjab, home to over 1.5 million Christians.

There are no places of worship for Hindu or Sikh students in 108 state-run universities. As opposed to Muslims, who openly pray in parks and roads, Christians and other religious minorities prefer to pray indoors. However, Christian conventions still encourage the community to make the sign of the cross in public.

Saad Suleman, a doctoral candidate in Veterinary Medicine, said his Muslim friends congratulated him the day the university church was announced.

"Christian students face difficulty in getting combined rooms in the hostels [even though] we have a strong administration who try to avoid religious problems," he said.

"The vice chancellor gave us permission to hold a Christmas program in 2014. However, it was canceled due to the Peshawar school massacre. We never asked again," said Suleman.

"The Catholic cathedral, situated three kilometers from UAF, is our usual Sunday destination. Now we have our own church, we will be able to offer regular prayers like other students," he added.

To escape abusive marriages, many Christians in Pakistan convert to Islam

For a Pakistani Christian like Shameela Masih, divorcing her abusive husband meant two choices – both nearly as bad as staying in the marriage.

By Naila Inayat

RNS (07.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2sW3BC4> - "I have to prove adultery allegations against him," said Masih, a 34-year-old mother of two. "The other option I have is to convert to Islam."

Masih recently filed for divorce from a husband she said "frequently beats me up" and a mother-in-law who she said burned her leg with coal.

But under the majority-Muslim country's laws, she must produce a witness who would testify to committing adultery with her husband. As a result, she's now reluctantly planning to renounce her faith.

"Converting is the easiest way out," she said. "My family tells me that they will disown me as a Muslim, but I don't have a choice."

Masih is one of thousands of Christians in Pakistan who have converted to Islam to divorce their spouses under laws stemming from the British colonial period, when traditional morals held sway.

Now Pakistani officials are considering revising the law to make it easier for couples to part ways.

"There are so many things in the existing 19th-century Christian Marriage Act that need to be revised and updated to stop the exploitation of people and protect the human rights," said Kamran Michael, the federal minister for human rights who is spearheading the drive for the legislation.

The law grants divorces to Christian couples on four grounds: adultery, conversion, marriage to another or cruelty. But proving adultery or cruelty is tough, especially in Pakistan, where adultery is a crime, and the stigma against domestic violence is weak in many parts of the country. Christians comprise less than 2 percent of Pakistan's population of 189 million.

Muslims, on the other hand, can easily obtain a divorce for a variety of reasons, including irreconcilable differences.

Formerly, Pakistan's laws on divorce mirrored those in Britain. But in the early 1980s, then-military dictator Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq restored older laws from the colonial period that applied to Christians divorcing. For Muslims, he left revised laws from the 1960s intact.

"The current law on Christian divorce undermines the dignity of women," said Fauzia Viqar, who chairs the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women. "Many Christian women are left in marriages where they are suffering cruelty by husbands without any relief from the state."

The law also puts needless stress on couples, said would-be divorcees.

"I want to divorce my wife amicably without charging her of adultery," said Emanuel Anthony, 29, a Christian street vendor in Lahore who has been married for five years. "She is the mother of my child. Why should I assassinate her character in public?"

His wife, Nabila, agreed.

"We have been separated for a year now. There is an understanding between us that we are not compatible and want different things from life," said the 25-year-old Christian

who teaches mathematics at a Catholic school. "I don't understand what the issue is, and why a law should govern my right to divorce."

Slated to be unveiled in Parliament in the coming weeks, the new law would expand the grounds for divorce and separate it from the Christian religion. Couples would be able to marry by registering with the government and then solemnizing their nuptials in the church if they so choose, said human rights ministry officials.

"Pakistani Christian couples would be able to divorce amicably without hurling adultery accusations or converting to another religion," said Haroon Sulaiman, a family lawyer in Lahore. "This will give the persecuted minority some relief."

The Catholic Church opposed the changes.

"Marriage is a lifelong and indissoluble union for better or for worse in Christianity – you cannot just amend the laws of God," said Catholic Bishop James Mathew. "Marriage is a sacrament, not a contract. This change is to defame our religion. Supporting the changes is like going against the Bible."

Masih said Christian leaders like Mathew can overlook her and other women because they weren't married.

"No one cares about us, we are left at the mercy of the Muslims and Christians alike," she said. "Once in power, they don't do anything for us. The Christian leaders are more worried about church politics instead of helping poor people like us."

Pakistani sewage worker dies after 3 doctors on Ramadan fast refuse to touch him

By Asif Aqeel

WorldWatch Monitor (05.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2rHJFna> - A Pakistani Christian sewerage cleaner has died after three doctors refused to treat him till his sludge-covered body had been washed; they said their Ramadan fast would be invalid ("makruh") because he was "unclean" and also belonged to a low caste. (The word for low caste, "chuhra", especially derogatory, is reserved for sanitary workers and often used in Pakistan synonymously for "Christian.")

Irfan Masih died on June 1, in Umar Kot Civil Hospital, Sindh, 300 kilometers from Karachi. Umar Kot has about 75 Christian families; almost all of them work as sanitary workers, a job that many Muslims refuse to do.

(Writer Ethan Casey notes: "Most Pakistani Christians today still do the same work as their untouchable ancestors: sweeping the streets and doing other menial jobs formerly deemed ritually or literally unclean by higher-caste".)

A number of Umar Kot Christians blocked a crossing after Irfan Masih's death, demanding that a criminal case be registered against three doctors. Senior Superintendent of Police Usman Javed Bajwa told World Watch Monitor that a case of murder by negligence had eventually been registered, and the police would submit its report on the merit in the court.

A Pakistani Christian NGO has said that a doctor's Hippocratic oath obliges him to treat a patient whose life is at risk in any circumstances, beyond religion and class. The Cecil and Iris Chaudhry Foundation wrote "We condemn this incident in the strongest manner. A society becomes exceedingly dangerous when it disregards all norms of humanity."

Other experts on Pakistan told WWM that this treatment of minorities has more to do with the legacy of the Indian caste system than Islamic theology about how the Ramadan fast could be invalidated by certain 'restrictions' on the faster. For example, there are exemptions from fasting for Muslim travellers or people who are ill.

Details of accident

Unmarried 35-year-old Irfan Masih, who lived with his family, reached his workplace at about 7 a.m. on June 1. Two Christian sanitary workers – Shaukat Masih and Yaqoob Masih – were ordered by their seniors, with Irfan, to unblock sewerage lines. They were not provided with any protective gear, his brother Parvaiz told World Watch Monitor.

"They objected that the lines, clogged for a long time, would be filled with poisonous gases, but the three inspectors told them that they either open the clogged lines or quit their jobs."

(Pakistan's sewerage system dates back to British colonial times – when pipes were buried under the ground, with manholes used to clean them. When a sewer line is blocked, a bamboo is put into the pipeline through the manhole. If it is filled with blackwater sewage, then a cleaner is expected to hold his breath and dive into the filthy water to open the blockage.)

Parvaiz Masih told WWM "When they reached Chorr Road, Yaqoob went down into the manhole. Irfan was a supervisor, so had no responsibility to go down the manhole, but when Yaqoob opened the blocked pipe, the poisonous gas leaked out and he fell unconscious.

"My brother Irfan then went down to tie a rope to Yaqoob to bring him up. When Yaqoob was being pulled up, the knot came loose: Yaqoob fell on Irfan, who also fainted. Lastly Shaukat went down to bring them both up but he also fainted.

"It was around 8 a.m. when I received a call and we all raced to the spot. Shaukat's brother Faisal also reached there. He tied one rope onto himself and took another rope to tie onto the bodies of the three. That's how we pulled the three, one by one, out of the manhole.

"We called the Civil Hospital to say we were bringing in three unconscious men, expecting it would receive and quickly treat them, but it turned out to be the opposite: the first doctor who came to examine them was Muhammad Yousuf. He told a ward assistant to get the bodies of the three washed and then he would examine them, as he was fasting, and any physical contact with them would mean Allah would disapprove of his fast."

"This same attitude was adopted by two doctors Allah Daad and Jaam Kambar who did not provide any medical treatment."

"Then a fourth doctor Hanif Arisar came, who gave them his full attention. He asked for oxygen to be given to Irfan, but the hospital had no arrangements for it."

"Shaukat and Yaqoob were shifted to Hyderabad in a critical condition, while my brother was pronounced dead after doctor Hanif examined him."

Umar Kot police station registered a case against six people, including the three doctors, after Masih's father, Nazir, complained.

Kanwal Lal Malhi, working with a local NGO, told World Watch Monitor that several organizations and human rights activists helped the Christians to organize the protest. "I remained with the family until the government decided to take up the case. Otherwise, initially, the police were unwilling to listen to them".

A report by Minority Rights Commission published in 2012 said that at least 70 Christians have died since 1988 while cleaning sewerage pipelines.

Journalist, Sameer Ajmal, reported in the daily Urdu 'Jang' newspaper on May 25 that candidates for sewerage cleaner jobs are still expected to dive into blocked manholes.

The incident, reported on all TV channels and in newspapers, has shaken Pakistanis' conscience; the Sindh government is considering compensation for the bereaved family.

People who smoke, eat openly during Ramazan face 3-month imprisonment

By Sehrish Wasif

The Tribune (11.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qct9uC> - The Senate Standing Committee on Religious Affairs on Wednesday unanimously approved the Ehtram-e-Ramazan (Amendment) Bill, 2017 under which fine for the hotel owners – violating the Ehtram-e-Ramazan Ordinance, 1981 – has been increased from Rs500 to Rs25,000.

People who will smoke or eat openly during Ramazan will be fined Rs500 along with 3-month imprisonment. TV channels or cinema houses that violate the law will be fined Rs500,000 or more.

The amendment bill was introduced by Senator Tanveer Khan in the Senate sitting held on January 16 and was referred to the Senate Standing Committee on Religious Affairs for further consideration.

During the meeting, Tanveer requested the committee to take strict action against people who violate the law during Ramazan. Earlier the committee members suggested closingdown cinema houses for three hours early in the morning and later for three hours after Iftar during Ramazan.

Minister of State for Religious Affairs and Inter-faith Harmony Pir Amin Ul Hasnat Shah suggested that all the cinema houses across the country should remain closed throughout the holy month.

Issues related to Ruet-e-Hilal committee

Discussing the issues pertaining to Ruet-e-Hilal committee, the committee's chairman Senator Hafiz Hamdullah urged the ministry to resolve the issue of moon sighting across the country. The ministry's officials told the senator that they had discussed the issue with all the relevant provincial departments.

It was suggested that the term of Ruet-e-Hilal committee should be made four years at federal, provincial and district levels. The committee should have two representatives

each from all provinces and one representative each from federal capital, Gilgit Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK).

It was also suggested that directors general of Met Office and the Pakistan Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission (Suparco) as well as a representative from the ministry be also made part of the moon-sighting panel.

Pir Amin Ul Hasnat Shah informed the committee that the federal government had not allocated any dedicated budget for the Ruet-e-Hilal committee due to which its chairman along with its members were working without salary and perks since the committee was constituted in 1974.

He said several times the Ministry of Religious Affairs had raised this issue at various levels and forums but so far no one had paid any heed to it.

"They believe that the role of the committee is not much as it only functions three to four times throughout the year. They forget that this committee has a major role to play as it announces most important religious events for the entire nation," he said.

Shah said even when the chairman and committee members travel to other city on an official visit they only get air ticket and stay at a 2-star hotel. "They do not get any TA/DA. Meanwhile, they also do not have money to load credit in their cell phones to do office work," he added.

He said 26 members of the committee are performing their duties under chairman Mufti Munibur Rehman, who has been performing his duties for the past 15 years.

The minister said currently there was no criterion for appointing/selecting a member for the committee. "Right now whoever applies for the membership becomes a member," he said.

Shah suggested reducing the number of the committee members from 26 to 9. "The less the number of members, the easier it will be for the federal government to allocate budget for their salaries," he said.

Christian woman's seven year death row ordeal over glass of water argument extended

A Christian woman's seven year ordeal on death row has been extended after a court dismissed an appeal for a new hearing.

By Katie Mansfield

Home of the Daily and Sunday Express (06.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2stc03g> - Asia Bibi, who has been on death row since 2010, was accused of making derogatory comments about the Prophet Mohammed during an argument with a Muslim woman over a glass of water.

Campaigners have called for the mother-of-two to be hanged as her case continues to be held up in Pakistan's courts.

Mrs Bibi's attorney Saiful Malook says Chief Justice of Pakistan Mian Saqib Nisar declined his client's request for an early appeal hearing sparking fears for the Christian's life.

If the Supreme Court upholds Mrs Bibi's conviction her only chance at survival is to appeal to Pakistan's president for clemency.

Mr Malook said: "I have been informed that the plea was declined by the CJP."

The mother of five, also known as Aasiya Noreen, will become the first woman in Pakistan to be lawfully executed for blasphemy if the death penalty is carried out.

More than 600,000 people have signed a petition called for Mrs Bibi to be released.

Her hearing has been delayed at least seven times in the last two years.

Joseph Nadeem, executive director of the Renaissance Education Foundation, told the Asia-based Catholic news outlet ucanews.com: "This is very unfortunate. Her husband became quiet when he heard the latest developments.

"We shall again apply for the hearing and keep struggling for justice.

"There are many factors at work behind the slow pace of judiciary. Her case has been in the doldrums due to huge pressure.

"There will be a strong reaction if Bibi is freed, opposing groups have made it a matter of honour and ego."

Critics of Pakistan's blasphemy laws say they have long been used by individuals and religious groups to settle disputes.

Lawyer Naeem Shakir told ucanews.com: "Such atrocities have become routine. The plight of Bibi has had a dampening effect on minorities.

"Their grief cannot be addressed because of religious retrogressive and extremist groups. Islamists consider her freedom a defeat for their movement."

51 year old Pastor given life imprisonment for alleged blasphemous text message

By Wilson Chowdhry

British Pakistani Christian Association (05.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qJ9TYc> - A Christian man of 51 years has been sentenced to life imprisonment for allegedly sending out blasphemous texts in Pakistan.

Christian NGO's up and down the country are galled by the decision to prosecute Mr Zafar Bhatti under section 295c of Pakistan's Penal Code, a decision they say is due to an Islamic bias that has consumed the nation.

Campaigners say there is no solid evidence that allows for the Lahore High Court's determination on 3rd May 2017. Mr Bhatti who was a Christian pastor until his arrest was accused of sending blasphemous text messages from his phone, yet several reports prove that the SIM was not registered to Mr Bhatti and was registered to a completely different Computerised National Identity card holder (CNIC).

Mr Zafar Bhatti was a co-accused defendant under blasphemy charges with Ghazala Khan whose CNIC card was registered against the phone SIM card. Ghazala who was arrested

on 11th November 2012 was shown some leniency as she was a woman and was fairly immediately granted bail for her charges.

In an extremely bizarre trial Justice Khalid Mehmood of the Lahore High Court refused to pass judgement against Ghazala on April 8th 2013, he tried to convince the petitioner Ibrar Ahmed, Secretary for Ahle Sunnat Pakistan to forgive Ghazala, stating that Muhammed forgave many people. Pakistani media groups labelled his compassion as a delay tactic. At the time Ghazala asked for the court to make a just decision of the crime and to exonerate her. However Ghazala insisted did not want to be forgiven by the petitioner as she felt that escape from her blasphemy charges in this manner would indicate original guilt. She remonstrated that as she was innocent of a crime she should be freed by the court on merit.

Ghazala Khan (39 yrs) passed away in November 2016 after losing a battle with Hepatitis C, thus surviving the ignominy of being sentenced for blasphemy charges.

Due to the security reasons Mr Bhatti's case proceedings were conducted on the premises of Central Jail Adiala, Rawalpindi, where Zafar Bhatti has been imprisoned since July 2012. Mr Bhatti has faced several attempts on his life at the prison including an incident of poisoning on March 31st 2013, which left him bleeding from his nose and mouth and left him in critical condition for days.

On 25th September 2014 Mr Bhatti narrowly escaped assassination after a rogue prison officer shot a 71 year old British Muslim Muhammed Asghar in a cell adjacent to Mr Bhatti's. Mr Asghar was taken to a private hospital and later fully recovered from critical condition in a private hospital despite being shot in the chest.

Jail guard Muhammad Yousaf wanted to kill all inmates accused of blasphemy against Islam, but was knocked to the ground and captured after other prison guards intervened on hearing the shooting. He was inspired to kill blasphemers after being encouraged by Muntaz Qadri who was also being held at Adiala Prison for his role in assassinating Muslim Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer, who called for abrogation of the draconian blasphemy laws of Pakistan. Muhammed Yousaf was from the same Barelvi cult as Muntaz Qadri within the Hanafi School of Islamic Jurisprudence. He was able to enter the prison with a gun concealed in his shoe as only a light frisk was taken on prison staff at the time. Since the attack prison security measures are said to have tightened up. During interrogation Mr Yousaf claimed a divine presence entered his dreams at night telling him he must kill all blasphemers.

Shamim Masih, BPCA reporter said:

"The blasphemy law is continuously misused to settle personal scores but also by Islamic zealots intent on annihilating Christians from Pakistan who now make up 15% of all allegations, a percentage that is increasing.

When people lay false charges against Christians who are later exonerated no action is taken by the government of Pakistan to intervene on behalf of the victims by prosecuting those who laid false allegations. This impunity has exacerbated the situation."

On Saturday 6th May, Shamim Masih met the wife of Zafar Bhatti, Nawab Bibi (65 years) and took her out for a meal to discuss the blasphemy victims case. Mrs Bhatti explained about the daily torture he faces in prison, she said:

"There have been numerous attempts to kill my husband - he is bullied everyday and he is not safe from inmates and prison staff alike. Every day I worry that I will receive word that he is dead, this worry is making me very age quickly.

I pray for him every day and when we meet we cry together and pray seeking God's intervention. I know God will free him one day but ask for Christians across the world to pray for him and to challenge their governments to help him.

My husband was a good man he was a committed Christian and a Pastor to many. Many Muslim people hated how quickly his church was growing they have taken this action to undermine his work. Yet despite their actions the church grows.

I wish our persecutors would see that Christians are not evil creatures. We are human beings created by God the same God that created them although they do not know this yet."

Wilson Chowdhry Chairman of the British Pakistani Christian Association, said:

"Zafar Bhatti has now been incarcerated for nearly five years for a crime he ostensibly did not commit. He is being convicted for a text message on a phone that was not his in a crime that for all intents and purposes was fabricated to remove him from his role as a Pastor.

That unjust draconian laws can be used in this fashion to wreak havoc on the lives of Christians and other minorities in Pakistan is a disgrace for the nation of Pakistan.

When even judges 'wash their hands' of the law as was enacted in the case of Ghazala Khan a co-defendant in this awful trial, it clearly expresses the dubious nature on these man-made laws that have no place in protecting a divine faith."

Boy, 10, killed in attempted blasphemy lynching in Pakistan

Five other people wounded after mob attacked police station in bid to seize Hindu man accused of insulting Islam

The Guardian (04.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2p3hAs9> - A 10-year-old boy has been killed and five other people wounded after a mob attacked a police station in an attempt to lynch a Hindu man charged with blasphemy in south-west Pakistan, officials said. It was the third major vigilante attack linked to accusations of insulting Islam in less than a month, as law enforcement agencies struggle to deal with a surge in violence.

Thursday's incident occurred in the town of Hub in the restive province of Balochistan following the arrest of Prakash Kumar, a 34-year-old member of the country's Hindu religious minority. Kumar, a crockery shop owner, was detained on Tuesday for allegedly posting an incendiary image on social media.

"When news of his arrest was published in local newspapers on Thursday, a crowd of some 500 people, including traders, clerics and politicians, surrounded the town's police station to demand he be handed over," police official Abdul Sattar told Agence France-Presse.

When police refused, the mob turned on them, beating up officers and local government officials before firing guns. The 10-year-old boy died and five others were wounded in the melee, he added.

Jam Mohammad, a second police official, confirmed the account, adding: "The siege went on for about three hours and the mob went on a rampage demanding that Kumar be handed over."

Order was restored once the government sent in paramilitary troops to disperse the mob, which police said was led by an influential cleric as well as Zia Shehzad, a politician from the ruling Pakistan Muslim League political party.

Mujeeb Qambrani, a senior local administration official, said his government had not succumbed to the mob because "we are legally bound to protect the accused".

On 13 April, hundreds of men attacked and killed a 23-year-old journalism student in the north-western town of Mardan in an incident that sparked a national backlash after a video went viral.

Just over a week later, a mob attacked a mentally ill man who claimed to be a prophet at his local mosque in north-western Chitral. He was rescued by police.

The spate of incidents follows a government drive against blasphemy, a hugely sensitive charge in conservative Muslim Pakistan. Unproven allegations have led to dozens of mob attacks or murders since 1990.

62-year-old Ahmadi man shot dead in Rahim Yar Khan

By Rana Tanveer

The Tribune (04.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qunB13> - A 62-year-old Ahmadi man was shot dead on Wednesday night in Saddar area of Rahim Yar Khan district.

Basharat Ahmad was on his way to his house in Green Town from a petrol pump situated in Zahir Pir Road when unidentified assailants intercepted him. He was taken to a local hospital where doctors pronounced him dead on arrival. The 62-year-old sustained two bullet wounds.

The reason behind the murder is yet to be ascertained. However, Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya spokesperson Saleemuddin claimed Ahmad was targeted because of his religious beliefs.

"Ahmad had no enmity and was gunned down because of the hate campaign against Ahmadis," the spokesperson said. He further said security agencies should take stern action against hate mongers who propagate Ahmadi killings.

An FIR has been registered under section 302 of Pakistan Penal Code, on the complaint of Ataul Qudoos, the son in law of the deceased.

Ahmad is the fourth Ahmadi to have been killed in the province in the past five weeks.

On April 18, Professor Tahira Malik was killed at her residence in Punjab University, Lahore. On April 7 Dr Ashfaq Ahmad, 68 – a veterinary doctor and a PhD in food and nutrition – was on his way to an Ahmadi place of worship to offer prayers when he was targeted in Sabzazar area of Lahore.

[Six Ahmadis killed in 2016, says report](#)

On March 30, Advocate Malik Saleem Latif – a cousin of Nobel laureate Dr Abdus Salam – was gunned down in Nankana Sahib while he was going to the court with his son Malik Awais on a motorcycle.

Condemned either way

Hundreds of blasphemy accused languish in jails and face threats even after they are acquitted

By Waqar Gillani

The News on Sunday (23.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2q8aZdj> - Adnan Prince is in his mid 30s and a Christian by faith. Accused of committing blasphemy in the last quarter of 2013, he has been granted bail by the Lahore High Court a few weeks ago. Even after getting bail, he is not a free person yet. He is hiding in some secret place. The challenges to appear before the court for his on-going trial amid security concerns are also persistent.

He is only one among the many blasphemy-accused victims languishing in jails or suffering from fear and threats once they are out. According to the police report, Prince has been accused of "drawing lines on a book and writing derogatory remarks against the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)."

"Since his bail, most people are not accepting or giving shelter to Prince. He is in a miserable condition as his case is still pending," says Nadeem Anthony, an activist and advocate helping him.

People accused of blasphemy in Pakistan face serious threats from extremist elements in and outside jails even after they have been acquitted. Getting bails in such cases is considered a rare relief as the incidence of granting bails is very low. While, in jails, under-trial inmates are vulnerable to attacks from other prisoners and even jail staff because of religious sentiments. The jail authorities are compelled to put them in solitary confinement.

In 2014, Muhammad Saqib, a mentally ill person who claimed to be a prophet was brutally attacked by a death-row prisoner in Central Jail, Gujranwala. A year later, in Adiala jail Rawalpindi a duty guard said he had a 'dream' prompting him to kill a prisoner named Muhammad Asghar, a 70-year old alleged blasphemer and according to his family, a mentally ill British national.

In 2009, the Gujrat police arrested composers of an allegedly blasphemous book. A few days later, one guard fired at and killed one of those accused in police custody. In 2003, a Christian, Samuel Masih was booked for blasphemy and later killed by a constable in Lahore whilst in police custody. In 2002, a Muslim cleric, Yousaf Ali, was charged for committing blasphemy in Lahore. He was sentenced to death but shot dead in jail the same year.

Pakistani parliament calls for blasphemy laws reform after student's lynching

Premium Times (18.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2pQLHPJ> - Pakistan's parliament on Tuesday called for a reform of controversial blasphemy laws which prescribe the death penalty for insulting Islam, after a university student was killed by a mob on April 14.

A resolution passed by the National Assembly condemned the lynching of the student, terming it "clod-blooded murder" and expressing resolve "to ensure that strong safeguards may be inserted into the blasphemy law to prevent its abuse through such atrocities in the future."

The move came as the country's top court began a probe into the murder of the student from Abdul Wali Khan University in north-western Pakistan, allegedly for his views on sufi Islam and socialism.

The blasphemy laws are a highly sensitive subject in majority-Muslim Pakistan, and it is the first-time Pakistani members of parliament as a whole have called for such changes.

People accused of blasphemy have been gunned down, burned alive and bludgeoned to death in some cases.

A secular governor of the most popular Punjab province was shot dead by a police officer in his security detail after he called for the release of a Christian woman facing blasphemy charges in 2011.

NAN reports that a journalism student of the Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan was brutally beaten to death by a violent mob in Pakistan over allegations of promoting 'blasphemous' content on social media.

Another student was injured in the incident, which took place Thursday, April 14 within the university premises, prompting officials to shut down the campus and vacate hostels in order to restore peace.

According to a Dawn report, a total of 45 people have been detained in connection with the mob attack.

The Dawn article notes that the two students had never been officially charged under Pakistan's blasphemy laws and that the violence seemed to have been provoked by rumours circulating among the university's students.

The Dawn quoted Mardan's Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police, Mohammad Alam Shinwari, as saying that Mashal Khan, the student who was killed, was said to be running Facebook pages "which allegedly published blasphemous content" online.

Stop crusade against Ahmadiyya community

A statement by the Asian Human Rights Commission

Asian Human Rights Committee (13.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2orjzS5> - A new wave of persecution and killings of the Ahmadi sect has started after an Islamabad high court

judge took a position on religious matters of individuals, particularly about free discussions on social media. Judge Shaukat Siddiqui is generally known as a bigot and hate monger. Leading the movement for the release of Constable Mumtaz Qadri, the murderer of former governor of Punjab province, Mr. Salman Taseer, the judge declared Qadri as 'Ghazi' (victorious for upholding the teachings of Islam).

In recent days, Judge Siddiqui is taking cases of alleged blasphemy and instructing the authorities to ban the accused persons' accounts of Facebook, Twitter and Internet. The Judge's interpretation of blasphemy amounts to any free discussion on Islam or its sacred personalities.

Unfortunately, the backlash of this focus on blasphemy is faced by the Ahmadiyya community, which ironically never challenges the ideas of other religions or sects of Islam.

Harassed, ostracized, and made outcasts, the "kafir" (infidel) Ahmadi community has been suffering incessantly at the hands of fundamentalist groups who vowed to wipe out all Ahmadis from Pakistan. Since 1974, when Ahmadis were declared non-Muslims, the country has witnessed a systematic cleansing, and a political, social, and economic ostracization of Ahmadis.

As Justice Siddiqui started delivering his decisions on bloggers accused of blasphemy charges, the persecution and killings of Ahmadis began again. Within a span of 10 days, two Ahmadis were gunned down. A few days ago, Malik Saleem Latif, a prominent Ahmadi lawyer in Nankana Sahib was shot dead, while his son was injured. Mr. Malik was a member of the Nankana Bar Association and relative of Pakistan's first Nobel Laureate, Dr. Abdus Salam. The proscribed group Lashkar e Jhangi claimed responsibility for his murder, raising doubts about the efficiency and effectiveness of the ongoing military operation against the group.

Before that, 68-year-old Dr. Ashfaq Ahmad was shot at from point blank range near Scheme Mor, Lahore on April 7, while he was going to Friday prayers along with his grandson and a friend. A motorcyclist, wearing a helmet, approached and shot at his temple, killing him immediately. Dr. Ashfaq Ahmad had a PhD in food and nutrition and was retired from the University of Veterinary Sciences.

At least six Ahmadis were killed in Pakistan in 2016 because of their religious beliefs, claims a recent report issued by the Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya. Pakistan's state inaction in the face of discrimination and prejudice against the Ahmadiya minority is condemnable and deplorable, to say the least. Pakistan is the only country in the world where not only is such prejudice institutionalised, but also practiced as a matter of religious duty. The country's law enforcement turns a deaf ear to hate speech against the beleaguered community, whose members despite being citizens of the state, are left to fend for themselves.

In December 2016 for instance, a mob attacked and burned down an Ahmadi place of worship in District Chakwal. In a letter addressed to the District Coordinator earlier, the community had notified the concerned authorities about their apprehension of an attack. The officials paid no heed to the warning, and instead tried to muzzle the voice of the victimized community by banning its publication of an Ahmadi paper, terming it seditious and inflammatory.

While charges of blasphemy have been a harbinger of mass atrocities against all religious minorities, the Ahmadi community has borne the brunt. Even amongst educated and well versed Pakistanis, the Ahmadis are considered the least deserving minority in terms of equal opportunities and civil rights, according to polls conducted by [reputed](#)

organizations. To date, several Ahmadis have been killed and hundreds injured as a result of mass hysteria in the name of blasphemy.

The world is well aware of the murder of hundreds of Ahmadis in Pakistan because of their faith and belief. Ahmadis are constantly drawing the attention of the international community to the barbaric laws targeting them in Pakistan, depriving them of freedom of religion and their fundamental human rights.

The Asian Human Rights Commission urges the media and all concerned organisations to take up this issue resolutely and pressure the Government of Pakistan to repeal discriminatory laws against religious minorities. Moreover, the Government must stop a well organised hate campaign against Ahmadis, resulting in killing, harassment and discrimination of innocent community members. The Government's claim to take action against extremists and militant organisations appears to be nothing more than political rhetoric. The actions of such hate mongers have not only destroyed the peace of Ahmadis, but also social harmony. In order to stop the violence and discrimination, it is crucial for the Government to take strict legal action against the perpetrators and revoke all laws that support their vicious intentions.

Young Christian shot dead in streets of Sheikhpura

Morning Star News (29.03.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2n9Nu5H> - A young Christian sanitation worker was gunned down in Pakistan on March 20 for refusing an influential Muslim's order to clean his outhouse on his day off, sources said.

Noman Munir Masih, 20, of Sheikhpura in Punjab Province, was the sole breadwinner of his Pentecostal family after his father died two years ago, his mother Khalida Bibi told Morning Star News. She has three other sons and two daughters.

Masih, who worked for the sanitation department of the Tehsil Municipal Authority (TMA) Sheikhpura in place of his deceased father, had shown up for work at 6 a.m. like many Christians historically relegated to low-paying cleaning jobs in Pakistan. He had marked his attendance and was leaving for his designated duty spot in the Mandiala Road area of the city with his brother-in-law and uncle when he was killed, she said.

"They were about to leave after dropping off Noman when suddenly two motorcyclists arrived there," Khalida Bibi said. "One of them whipped out a pistol and opened fire on Noman, killing him instantly."

The assailants fled on their motorcycle after the attack, leaving the other two men unharmed, she said, adding that the family is in shock that he could be taken from them so easily. The primary suspect has been arrested, but there has been little progress in the case. Rights advocates note that many Muslims in Pakistan believe they can mistreat Christians with impunity as the minority community lacks sufficient resources and status to seek justice.

Kashif Naimet, an attorney pursuing the case on behalf of the indigent family, told Morning Star News that a local influential Muslim had threatened Masih after he refused to sweep his outhouse (*dera*) on a Sunday, his day off. Naimet said Daanu Chaddar on March 17 had asked Masih to work the following Sunday.

"Noman refused, citing Sunday as his weekly day off," Naimet said. "Ostensibly angered by the Christian's refusal to submit to his demand, Chaddar allegedly told Noman to be ready to face 'dire consequences,' as he will not take no for an answer from a petty sanitary worker. Chaddar reportedly threatened Noman that he would 'cut off his legs and riddle his body with bullets' for defying his order."

Police have arrested Chaddar as the primary suspect and registered a case (No. 235/17 under sections 302 and 34 of the Pakistan Penal Code), he said.

"Noman was a simple sanitary worker and had no enmity with anyone," Naimet said. "His refusal to clean the Muslim's *dera* apparently led to his killing."

Police initially took two suspects into custody but released one of them after investigation, he said. Though Chaddar is still in police custody, there has been no progress in his prosecution, Naimet said. For instance, the relatives who witnessed the killing could easily identify the killers but have not been called for questioning, he said.

Riaz Masih Bhatti, president of the Sheikhpura TMA sanitary workers union, told Morning Star News that about 350 Christians were working in the city's sanitation department.

"The sanitation department comprises mostly Christian staff, while Muslims are hired for other departments," Bhatti said. "There have been frequent incidents of prejudice against Christian sanitary workers, but Noman's murder in a brazen attack in broad daylight has sent a wave of shock and panic in the entire community."

Bhatti said that Chaddar's relatives were pressuring police and the victim's family for a "reconciliation" agreement.

"Some elders of the Chaddar clan visited Noman's house two days ago and sought reconciliation, but we told them that we will not stop pursuing the case until the murderers are arrested and brought to justice," he said. "We may be weak, but we will not let them get away with murder. Today it was Noman, tomorrow it may be some other poor Christian, so we will have to remain steadfast in order to secure our community."

The investigating officer on the case was unavailable for comment in spite of repeated attempts by Morning Star News.

Contempt toward Christian sanitation workers is deeply rooted in Pakistan. Muslims refer to sweepers and other Christian workers as *Chuhras*, a derogatory term for street sweepers, an occupation assigned only to those of such low "untouchable" social standing that they are below the remnant caste system predating Pakistan's predominantly Islamic society.

Christian rights activist Napoleon Qayyum said that Christians account for 90 percent of sewage workers and an even high percentage of sweepers in Pakistan.

"It's no hidden secret that Muslims want to keep Christians in this degrading occupation," Qayyum said. "Several job advertisements from government departments for posts of sweepers clearly state that the candidates must be non-Muslim; some even specify that they must be Christians."

Masih's murder was another manifestation of the contempt the Muslim majority has for Christians, especially those associated with sanitation work, he said.

"Many Muslims find it hard to accept refusal by a 'lowly' Christian," he said. "This is not the first time a Christian sanitary worker has been killed or subjected to violence for refusing to comply with unjust demands of persons from the Muslim majority. The situation won't change for the better for Christian street sweepers and sanitation workers until the state realizes its responsibility toward all citizens regardless of their faith, caste and creed."

Jailed Christians forced to convert to Islam, a disgrace on the justice system says Pakistani Church

The accused are asked to change religion in exchange for their release. The latest case sparks protest among Christians. Girls are converted by force to marry Muslims whilst Christians men who marry Muslim are beaten and their homes torched. Even Asia Bibi was offered to convert to Islam.

By Kamran Chaudhry

AsiaNews (30.03.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2n6vf0T> - Religious leaders and Christian activists are calling for action against a prosecutor who confessed to pushing Christian prisoners to give up their faith to embrace Islam.

This comes after Pakistani media reported that Deputy District Public Prosecutor Syed Anees Shah told 42 Christian prisoners before an anti-terrorism court in Lahore, Punjab, that he could "guarantee their acquittal" if they converted to Islam.

Contacted by a British newspaper, Shah first denied the allegation then conceded that he had offered them a choice.

The Christians involved in the case are all from Youhanabad, Lahore. They were arrested in connection with the lynching of two suspected Muslim terrorists shortly after the Taliban attacked two churches on 15 March 2015.

"It is really bad to lead people astray," said Rev Arshad Ashknaz of Christ Church, from one of the churches attacked in Youhanabad, speaking to *AsiaNews*. "This," he added, "will give a bad image to the court and the whole legal fraternity.

In his view, "The public prosecutor can be sued for this prejudiced action. We plan to meet him soon. The government should reject this. Fear of death can force anyone to change religion".

This has not happened in isolation. Forced conversions are a hot topic in the country. Pakistani human rights organisations note that each year about a thousand Hindu and Christian women are forced to convert to marry Muslim men.

According to the latest Report on religious minorities in Pakistan by the National Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Pakistan, five Christians converted to Islam in 2014, including three teenager girls who were abducted and forced into marriage.

Against the backdrop, Sindh last year became the first Pakistani province to pass a law against forced religious conversions. However, the provincial government was forced to go back on its decision to protect minorities after opposition from some religious scholars.

For Rev Ashknaz, "There is no religious freedom. The whole system supports Christian women who marry their Muslim spouses, but it is a torment for Christian men who do the same. Their families suffer and their houses are burnt".

According to Nadeem Anthony, a Christian lawyer, Asia Bibi, the Christian mother on death row for the past seven years charged with blaspheming the Prophet Mohammad, was made a similar offer.

However, "My faith is alive and I will never convert", she told him when they met at the Sheikhpura District Jail in 2010.

"This is a common practice. Even my Muslim friends asked me to do the same. Such impositions are expected in cases of religious persecution", said the lawyer, who is also a human rights activist.

Cousin of Nobel laureate Abdus Salam gunned down in Nankana Sahib

By Saad Sayeed

Reuters (30.03.2017) - <http://reut.rs/2nOdNew> - A prominent member of Pakistan's minority Ahmadi community and relative of its first Nobel Prize winner was gunned down on Thursday in an attack claimed by banned militant group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.

Malik Saleem Latif, a cousin of Abdus Salam, who shared the physics prize in 1979, was shot just yards from his home in the town of Nankana, near Lahore in the southern province of Punjab, said Saleemuddin, a spokesman for the Ahmadi community.

Latif was riding his motor-bike to work with his son when a gunman opened fire, said Saleemuddin, who goes by only one name.

"Threats against Ahmadi are common in the area and Latif was a prominent member of the community and a well-known lawyer," he added.

The Ahmadi community has been a target of mob violence and attacks since the government legislated the sect as non-Muslim in 1974.

"Saleem Latif was spreading Ahmadi beliefs in the region," the militant group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, said in a statement claiming Thursday's attack.

It was the latest in a series of sectarian incidents in Pakistan, where security forces have battled groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi for years.

"We have three teams investigating and searching for the assailants and trying to apprehend them," district police officer Shahzada Billa Umer told Reuters.

Ahmadi are not allowed to call themselves Muslim or use Islamic symbols in their religious practices, a crime punishable under Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

The laws also make propagation of Ahmadi beliefs an offence, with 494 Ahmadi accused in 1,335 such cases over the past 30 years, rights body Amnesty International has said in a report.

Salam, who was Pakistan's only Nobel laureate until Malala Yousufzai shared the peace prize in 2014, remains a contentious figure because of his religious background.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government recently named a university physics department after Salam, drawing condemnation from the religious right, including the state funded Council of Islamic Ideology.

In 2010, two simultaneous attacks on Ahmadi mosques in Lahore by the Pakistani Taliban killed 94 people. Three days later, militants stormed the hospital where survivors were taken, killing 12 people, mostly police and hospital staff.

Salam, who died in 1996, shared the Nobel Prize with Sheldon Glashow and Steven Weinberg for helping to pave the way to the discovery of the "God particle," one of science's greatest achievements in the last 100 years.

HRWF new campaign for sixteen year-old Christian prisoner

HRWF (24.03.2017) – Nabeel Masih, a 16-year-old Christian in Pakistan, has been jailed since 18th September 2016 for a Facebook post that was allegedly blasphemous.

A Muslim friend accused him of "sharing" and "liking" on Facebook a "defamed and disrespected" photo of the Kaaba, the holiest Islamic site in Mecca.

Nabeel was charged under section 295 ("injuring or defiling place of worship, with intent to insult the religion of any class") and 295A ("deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs") of the Pakistan Penal Code. These are otherwise known as Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

The boy's defense attorney, Riaz Anjum, said that the case against Nabeel is "clearly fabricated" and that it had been registered with "malafide intention" and "ulterior motives."

More than two-hundred people in Pakistan were charged under blasphemy laws in 2015, many of whom were religious minorities such as Christians, who make up one-percent of Pakistan's population. As observed by Morning Star News: *"the laws are often used to settle personal scores, and Islamist groups and lawyers often advocate the harshest punishments and apply pressure for convictions on police and courts"*.

On 7th February 2017, the judge in Punjab Province's Kasur District denied to grant him bail and therefore he remains in prison under a baseless blasphemy charge while he maintains his innocence.

HRWF has opened a campaign to call for the release of Nabeel Masih. We are asking individuals and organisations to write letters to officials in Pakistan requesting that Nabeel Masih be released from prison and that charges against him be dropped. To learn more about how you can participate in our campaign, please [click here](#).

HRWF documents FoRB prisoners in over twenty countries, including Pakistan. Thus far, we have documented over fifty FoRB prisoners in 2017. [Click here to visit our 2017 Prisoners Database](#).

Pakistan asks Facebook and Twitter to help identify blasphemers

Companies approached in effort to locate Pakistanis at home or abroad so they can be prosecuted or potentially extradited

By Alex Hern and agencies

The Guardian (17.03.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2n6nJBy> - Pakistan has asked Facebook and Twitter to help identify Pakistanis suspected of blasphemy so it can prosecute them or pursue their extradition.

Under the country's strict blasphemy laws, anyone found to have insulted Islam or the prophet Muhammad can be sentenced to death.

The interior minister, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, said an official in Pakistan's Washington embassy had approached the two social media companies in an effort to identify Pakistanis, either within the country or abroad, who recently shared material deemed offensive to Islam.

He said Pakistani authorities had identified 11 people for questioning over alleged blasphemy and would seek the extradition of anyone living abroad.

Facebook said it reviews all government requests carefully, "with the goal of protecting the privacy and rights of our users".

"We disclose information about accounts solely in accordance with our terms of service and applicable law. A mutual legal assistance treaty or other formal request may be required for international requests, and we include these in our government requests report," which is publicised each year, it said in a statement.

Facebook has often struggled to deal with the varying cultural norms around censorship in the hundred-plus countries where it operates. In a sprawling manifesto released in February, the company's chief executive, Mark Zuckerberg, described one possible solution to the difficulty: "combine creating a large-scale democratic process to determine standards with AI to help enforce them".

In that plan, Zuckerberg said, Facebook would ask users all over the world to vote on what sort of content they found acceptable to see on their social media feeds. Content which breached those personal and national standards would then be automatically flagged by an artificial intelligence, and removed without the need for human intervention.

Twitter declined to comment.

Pakistani court frees man sentenced to death for blasphemy

The Washington Post (28.02.2017) - <http://wapo.st/2mDKfiL> - A Pakistani court freed an Islamic preacher who was sentenced to death four years ago on charges of blasphemy, a defense lawyer said Tuesday.

Chaudhry Mehmood Akhtar said that a judge in the city of Rawalpindi acquitted Mohammad Ishaq on Friday after finding him “completely innocent” of insulting Islam.

Ishaq was custodian at a shrine in Punjab province when he was arrested and sentenced to death in 2013 after a citizen accused him of claiming in conversation to actually be God.

“My client is a practicing Muslim and he was a victim of false charges. Now I am doing the paperwork to get him out of a jail,” Akhtar told The Associated Press.

Under Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, anyone accused of insulting God, Islam or religious personalities can be sentenced to death. However the laws are also sometimes used to settle personal scores or grudges.

Human rights groups have called for amending Pakistan’s harsh blasphemy laws, which are often misused against the country’s minority Christian community. In 2015, a Muslim mob beat a Christian couple to death and burned their bodies for allegedly desecrating the Quran.

Pakistani boy refused bail in Kaaba ‘blasphemy’ case

By Asif Aqeel

World Watch Monitor (13.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2kNXwX2> - A Pakistani Christian boy accused of blasphemy for “liking” and “sharing” a Facebook post which “defamed and disrespected” the Kaaba in Mecca – the building at the centre of Islam’s most sacred mosque – has been refused bail.

Lawyers for Nabeel Masih, 16, argued that he should be granted bail as he has no prior convictions and is still a juvenile.

However, a magistrate’s court in Kasur, 50km south of Lahore, rejected the application on 7 February.

In October, the lawyers reported being intimidated by the complainant’s supporters as they made their Appeal Court appearance on 3 October.

Aneeqa Maria Anthony said she was told by a lawyer for the complainant to “watch herself and stay away”. She also said about 80 people at the hearing threatened Masih’s family.

Original article (11 Oct, 2016)

Lawyers ‘threatened’ in boy’s Kaaba ‘blasphemy’ case

Lawyers representing a 16-year-old Pakistani Christian boy accused of blasphemy for ‘liking’ a photo posted on Facebook have reported being intimidated by the complainant’s supporters as they made their Appeal Court appearance on 3 October.

Aneeqa Maria Anthony, head of the legal team representing the boy, Nabeel Masih, said she was told by a lawyer for the complainant to “watch herself and stay away”. She also said about 80 people at the hearing made the courtroom tense, after they protested and threatened Masih’s family.

The appeal was heard in Pattoki, a town 50 miles from Lahore in north-eastern Pakistan. Anthony will apply to get the case heard in Lahore, where her legal team and the boy’s family will feel safer.

“Pakistan is an Islamic state. We are all Muslims. These are Muslim courts, so you should not defend such a criminal. You people come here from Lahore to pursue this case, but there are many people here whom you cannot see, so you better watch yourself and stay away.”

She said she is “confident [Masih] has committed no crime and that is why we are representing him.. Nabeel is innocent: the accusation against him has not yet been proven”.

Masih was arrested on 18 Sep. after a complaint had been filed with the police earlier in the day. The complainant, Akhtar Ali, said Masih had ‘liked’ and shared on Facebook a defamatory photograph of the Kaaba – the building at the centre of Islam’s holiest site in Mecca.

After the incident many Christians living in the area went into hiding fearing reprisals, though they later returned.

Masih was in court because his application for bail was being contested. According to three lawyers present in the courtroom, Amin Muzammal Chaudhry – the complainant’s lawyer – told Anthony that Masih’s “is a blasphemy case and that this man has blasphemed against Islam. You should know that Pakistan is an Islamic state. We are all Muslims. These are Muslim courts, so you should not defend such a criminal. You people come here from Lahore to pursue this case, but there are many people here whom you cannot see, so you better watch yourself and stay away.”

Human rights lawyer Napoleon Qayyum said Christians and other religious minorities must seek justice through the courts, but he criticised Chaudhry’s behaviour: “We condemn this treatment of attorneys in the courtroom. Pakistan’s Christians are citizens of the country. We have lived here for a long time and should not be considered outsiders.”

Religious freedoms are guaranteed in Pakistan’s Constitution, which was a secular state at its independence in 1947, though became an Islamic republic in 1956. It is estimated that 95% of Pakistan’s population are Muslim, and about 1.6% (2.5 million) Christian.

In the 2016 World Watch List (published by Christian charity Open Doors) of countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian, Pakistan is 6th, just behind Syria. “Pakistan’s blasphemy laws continue to be abused to settle personal scores, particularly against minorities including Christians,” reports Open Doors.

A report published by Human Rights Watch on 25 Sep. stated: “Public surveys and reports of government accountability and redress institutions show that the police are one of the most widely feared, complained against, and least trusted government institutions in Pakistan, lacking a clear system of accountability and plagued by corruption at the highest levels.

"District-level police are often under the control of powerful politicians, wealthy landowners, and other influential members of society. There are numerous reported cases of police extrajudicial killings of criminal suspects, torture of detainees to obtain confessions, and harassment and extortion of individuals who seek to file criminal cases.

Other social media cases

In July, Pakistani Christian Nadeem James and his family fled their home in the religiously conservative city of Gujarat after he was accused of committing blasphemy by sending an offensive text message from his mobile phone.

In May, Imran Masih, a 30-year-old road sweeper, was attacked and had a *fatwa* declared against him after a work colleague said he'd found an anti-Islamic video on Masih's phone.

In 2014, lawyer Rashid Rehman was threatened in court while he represented a man accused of 'liking' a 'blasphemous' message posted on Facebook. Rehman was later murdered at his office.

Pakistani Christians 'attacked' as land dispute escalates

By Asif Aqeel

World Watch Monitor (10.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2mKZu95> - More than 200 men, some armed with sticks, suddenly gathered on Wednesday morning (8 Feb) beside the Alba Presbyterian Church in Sankhatra, 115km north of Lahore, intent on building a boundary wall.

"Children were going to school and men were leaving for work when this large number stormed into the area and started construction," said Asher Moon, 38, the church's pastor. "Some of our men and women tried to intervene but they were called names and men armed with sticks beat them."

Sankhatra is part of Narowal District, where Presbyterian missionaries from the US city of Philadelphia journeyed in 1855 to begin a mission that would spread the message of Christianity across Punjab, which had only come under British rule in 1849.

Thirty Christian families still live in Sankhatra, but their land has been under legal threat.

Moon, who took over the leadership of the church when his father died in 2011, said the police were "reluctant to register a case" against the attackers, although five women and a 13-year-old boy were among those hurt.

"For [the police], our being insulted has no meaning," he said.

"We called the emergency response police three times, but they only arrived after two hours, after the crowd had beaten and insulted our men and women. The construction work was still going on and we showed them a magistrate's injunction that no party can change the current status until the ownership of the land is decided in the court, but the police refused to acknowledge this court order."

The legal battle has been raging for ownership of the 1750-square-yard piece of land since April 2016.

"It was even worse at that time," said Moon. "They brought bulldozers and fired shots in the air and beat our men and women. They even demolished some of our houses."

Moon said they had "rushed to court" to obtain an injunction against their eviction. They received it and the court case is ongoing.

But Moon said that last week "false propaganda" was spread that the court had ended the temporary injunction, leading the men to think they could return to demolish more buildings.

"Most of our people are illiterate and work menial jobs, so [the locals] had thought that it would be easy to fool them," he said. But Moon had the injunction renewed at court on 6 February.

Chaudhry Kashir, a local Christian councillor, told World Watch Monitor that the attackers want to set up a market of between 50 to 100 shops on the land, which is beside a main road.

"The other party has documents that show that someone gave this [government-owned] land to the Christians for living about seven decades ago but there is no valid proof that is provided in the court yet," he said. "Mostly, civil litigation on land issues goes on for 20 to 30 years in Pakistan. So parties indulge in criminally evicting the weaker side to show to the court that they are in possession of the land to strengthen their case."

A local police officer, Ishtiaq Ahmed, said he didn't know if the land had ever been owned by the government, but that the Christians were "lying" in saying that "this is their land, or that they have any connection with it".

"The other party had legal documents," he added.

Ahmed also claimed that no violence had taken place on Wednesday morning – only a "verbal clash".

"If their women had been beaten, then the police would have registered a case," he said. "There are no houses on the land and I don't know if there were houses 10 months ago that were demolished."

But Moon said there have been Christian homes on the land "since my childhood".

"I was told that there used to be a pond for sanitary water but when the sewerage system was set up, this pond dried up and Christians filled it in with earth and built their homes," he said. "Now this land has commercial value and they are trying to snatch it from us. Our opponents have encroached on the church land too: up to five feet on one side of the church, and 15 feet on the other side.

"The same police who were unwilling to register a case, and then were unwilling to accept the court injunction, are now having to acknowledge the court injunction because of pressure from higher authorities."

Several attacks on Pakistan's Christian minority have been linked to land disputes and it is thought this has also been the motive in several accusations of blasphemy against Christians. Incidents include the 2009 Gojra communal violence in which seven Christians died; the blasphemy accusation against 16-year-old Rimsha Masih in 2012 and the Joseph Colony arson attack in Lahore in March 2013.

As World Watch Monitor reported last year, Christians were also threatened with eviction from government land in Islamabad, the capital, because their “ugly” settlements spoil the landscape of “one of the most beautiful cities in the world”.

It used to be prohibited for members of the so-called “untouchable” castes – which includes many Christians – to buy land. Even today, most Christians live in irregular or illegal settlements on government land.

Background

Narowal is significant for the Pakistani Christian population because it’s the district where Christianity first started to spread through Presbyterian missionary Andrew Gordon in 1855.

In 1873 there were only about 4,000 Christians in Punjab, from diverse metropolitan backgrounds.

Then, 10 miles from Narowal, in 1873 an “untouchable” man known as “Ditt” (who had to skin dead animals and pick up garbage from the streets to survive) converted to Christianity. Ditt spread the Gospel among his caste in surrounding villages as US and European missionaries spread education and healthcare. From 1881, the number of Christians in Punjab multiplied from just a few thousand to over half a million by 1941.

Pakistan soon to outlaw mob violence and forced conversions of minorities

Pakistan’s parliament passes law that punishes sectarianism, lynching and false accusations that lead to wrongful convictions. Now the bill awaits the president’s approval. Christian activist praises the effort to curb terrorism. Leader of an Islamist group defends the blasphemy law.

By Kamran Chaudhry

Asia News (07.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2lnE9ST> - The Pakistani National Assembly passed a law amending some criminal laws. For the first time, sectarianism, mass lynching and forced conversions will be punished. The explicit aim of the legislation is to improve the conditions of the country’s religious minorities.

Speaking to *AsiaNews*, some activists expressed their satisfaction with the initiative, which, however, needs the final signature of the president.

“These measures were crucial to save our country,” said Samuel Pyara, a Christian, president of Bright Future Society. “Mob justice has become a part of people’s mind-set. There was a great need to make it a punishable offence and we appreciate the government’s action.”

Parliament yesterday passed the Criminal Laws (Amendment) Act 2016 to amend some existing laws, including the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) of 1860, the Police Act 1861, the Criminal Procedure Code of 1898, and the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997.

The bill’s statement of objectives and reasons says that “terrorism, sectarianism and extremism have gripped the entire country and these acts have become the order of the day.”

With respect to the persecution of religious minorities, inciting sectarian violence and ethnic hatred and "deliberately using words to hurt the religious feelings of any person", punishment "has been enhanced from a year-long imprisonment and unspecified fine to imprisonment extendable to three years and not less than one year, and/or fine of Rs500,000" (US\$ 4,770).

The new law also imposes a sentence of up to 10 years and no less than five years and a fine of up to Rs1 million in the case of an underage girl as defined in the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1992, or a non-Muslim woman.

For the first time, lynching by "organised group or a mob by taking the law in own hands" is also illegal.

Punishment against anyone giving false information to a government official that causes him to use his lawful powers to injury has been increased from a maximum of six months to up to seven years in case the offence about which information has been given is punishable with death and five years in case it is punishable with life imprisonment.

In recent years, Pakistan has seen several incidents of mob violence. Christian leaders have repeatedly complained that most remain unpunished. The latest involves the acquittal of 115 people accused in connection with a fire that swept through an entire Christian neighbourhood in Lahore late last month.

Pyara Samuel, who filed an appeal to the High Court in Lahore against the Joseph Colony verdict, believes that the new legislation could be a valuable tool for Christians.

Sohail Ahmad Raza, director of the Interfaith Relations Minhaj ul Quran international, spoke about the abduction of Christian and Hindu women to force them to marry their kidnappers.

"It is wrong morally, legally, socially as well as at a human level. Forced marriage is not allowed in Sharia (Islamic law) and results from illiteracy," he said, adding that "Those who use mosque loudspeakers to incite hate and violence are simply insane and disturbed people".

Alongside support, the new law also has its critics. Hafiz Ghulam Abbas is one of them. "It pains rulers when ulemas speak of righteousness and truth from mosque minarets," said the head of the Tehreek Labaik Ya Rasool Allah in Lahore, a group in favour of the blasphemy law.

"Why stop *adaan* (call for prayer) when a simple street hawker can use a sound amplifier. We reject this amendment and will make sacrifices" against it.

Pakistani Christian accused of blasphemy out on bail after three years in prison

World Watch Monitor (03.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2kRzmfI> - After spending more than three years in jail, a Christian accused of blasphemy, and facing the death penalty, was granted bail by the Supreme Court in Lahore on 1 Feb.

Adnan Prince has been imprisoned in Lahore's district jail since November 2013 after he was accused by a work colleague of insulting Islam, the Qur'an and Islam's prophet.

The three-man bench, headed by Justice Dost Muhammad Khan, ordered the release of Prince, a resident of Lahore, against a bail bond worth Rs300,000 (around \$3,000).

According to Asma Jahangir, Prince's lead counsel, the case against her client should have been decided within two years. This did not take place due to lawyers' strikes and delaying tactics by the prosecution, she said. She also explained that legal formalities could not be fulfilled; guidelines passed by the Supreme Court say that a police officer of at least the rank of Superintendent should have conducted the investigation. She added that there were no direct eyewitnesses and that all forensic evidence failed to link the accused. She also said there was a strong possibility of his release and little chance of a decision in the case in the near future.

While earlier bail applications were dismissed by both a district judge and the Lahore High Court, the Supreme Court granted Prince bail and ordered his release.

Similar cases have been known to take as long as seven years to reach trial. Perhaps the most famous on-going "blasphemy" case is that of Aasiya Noreen (also known as Asia Bibi), who was sentenced to death for insulting Islam in 2009 and still remains in jail, awaiting a delayed final appeal hearing by the Supreme Court.

Original article (16 Dec 2013)

A Christian held in a Pakistani prison has told World Watch Monitor about the events surrounding his arrest and current detention.

In October 26-year-old Adnan Prince (also known as Adnan Masih) was accused by a work colleague of insulting Islam, the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad. A conviction of blasphemy carries the death sentence or life imprisonment.

After his accusation, Prince went into hiding, but returned a month later after police arrested several of his family, including his brother and mother.

World Watch Monitor caught up with Prince from his jail cell in Lahore.

Prince's story

It all started on October 7 when Prince was filling in for his brother at the Diamond Glass shop in Lahore.

During his shift, Prince, who holds a Master's degree in English Literature, says he found a copy of a controversial book, *I asked the Bible why the Qur'ans were set on fire* (Urdu: *Mein ney Bible sey poocha Qur'an kyun jaley*), and started to read it and to make notes inside it.

The book was written by Maulana Ameer Hamza (the leader of Jamat-ud-Dawa, a political arm of the jihadi organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba, which claimed responsibility for the Mumbai bombings).

While Prince was reading the book, a Muslim colleague of his, Abid Mehmood, spotted him and took offence. The next day, Mehmood went to the local police station and alleged that Prince had "marked several pages... with abusive words against the Prophet of Islam".

Hearing that he had been accused, Prince fled. However, he claims that he did nothing wrong.

"I found the book quite erroneous, giving incorrect information about Christianity," he said. "So I wrote comments with Biblical references in several places, but no abusive language was used."

After Prince had fled, his brother, mother, aunt and uncle were arrested and told they would not be released until he returned.

Hearing of his family's arrests, Prince returned home on November 6.

Once at the police station, Prince said he was told to keep it quiet that he had been arrested on blasphemy charges, for fear of attacks by other prisoners. But he also said that police tortured him at night.

"The police were on the verge of killing me after I surrendered to them, but God kept me safe by His grace," he said. "When I came to my senses [after one round of torture], I was told that a heavy machine would be rolled over my thighs, which would not only be painful but would render me permanently impotent. Then the deputy superintendent of police pushed the barrel of a pistol into my mouth and told me to confess that I had written abusive words in the book. He said he would count to three and that if I didn't confess, he would pull the trigger."

Prince added that on one occasion he was taken outside and told that he was free to go.

"But I knew they were lying and would shoot me from behind if I left," he said. "I told them that if you want to shoot me, then shoot me in the chest and not in the back. They stopped torturing me when they felt they would not be able to shake my resolve."

Prince's lawyer Aneeqa Maria, Director of The Voice Society, told World Watch Monitor that the police were legally bound to present him before a court within 24 hours after his first arrest, but that they did not do so for fear of starting a riot.

"Every day dozens of bearded men crowded the courtroom where Adnan was to be presented, so the police kept lingering on," she said. "After his surrender, a police officer told me about the pressure the police had on them from the Jamat-ud-Dawa, who wanted to take law and order into their own hands."

Prince was brought before the court after three days, and then transferred to Lahore District Jail, where he is confined to a small cell on his own. He said that he was being kept away from other prisoners for his protection.

His trial has yet to begin. In the meantime, there is a petition in for him to be released on bail.

Similar cases have been known to take as long as seven years to reach trial. Perhaps the most famous on-going 'blasphemy charge' case is that of Aasiya Noreen (also known as Asia Bibi), who was sentenced to death for insulting Islam in 2009 and still remains in jail, awaiting her appeal.

Christians harassed

Before Prince turned himself in, a letter was sent to a Christian colony in Wassanpura, Lahore, near to where Prince lived, saying: "Every Christian household in this area is being told to immediately vacate their houses. This time you are verbally warned, but the next time you will be burned and killed."

The letter was signed by Ashiqaan-Rusool (Devotees of the Apostle), one of four Islamist groups in the area.

One of the Christians in the colony, Javed Masih, lodged a complaint with the local police.

"After Adnan and his family had fled from their houses, these extremists were looking for an excuse to attack us," he said. "For this reason about 12 families fled, while several other families sent their women to their relatives for fear of an attack from the Muslims."

Police stationed themselves outside the colony for a week, and then left. Following this, Masih submitted a petition to the court for continued protection.

On November 25, the judge ordered the police to "readdress the grievance".

Pakistan PM premature in saying country will soon be 'minority-friendly'

World Watch Monitor (31.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2kQ11u4> - Pakistan's Prime Minister has said "the day is not far off when Pakistan will internationally be known as a minority-friendly country".

Meanwhile, a Senate Committee has been set up to debate how "to prevent the country's blasphemy laws being applied unfairly, despite opposition from religious conservatives". It has unearthed a 24-year-old report, which contains proposals for modifications, and Senator Farhat Ullah Babar says this would be the first time ever that a parliamentary body is to consider a formal proposal on how to prevent the misuse of the blasphemy laws.

Despite this, the Finance Minister on 28 Jan re-iterated that the blasphemy law could never be changed, saying: "Pakistan was the only country whose foundation was laid on Islam."

And the same party that announced the new committee – the Pakistan People's Party – has at the last minute withdrawn its Minority Protection Bill, due to come into force in the south-eastern province of Sindh, which borders India and so has many Hindus.

The bill, which prohibited forced religious conversions or even wilful conversions for those under the age of 18, had been passed in November, but was followed by protests by Islamic political parties. Police protection had to be provided for the parliamentarians who worked on the bill.

In October, the National Assembly had adopted a resolution, presented by Hindu parliamentarian Lal Chand Malhi, "urging the government to take necessary steps to stop forced religious conversions and marriages of women belonging to minorities".

Hindus in Sindh have long decried many of their young girls being forcibly converted to Islam. (The abduction of Hindu girl, Rinkle Kumari in 2012 became international news, though the apex court of Pakistan ruled that she had not been forced to convert).

After the PPP backtracked on its own bill, Hindu parliamentarian Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, of the ruling PML-N party, told World Watch Monitor that the PPP President

had “caved in to religious elements” after meeting with the head of Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamic political party.

“The Hindu community has been further made vulnerable by this move and its consequences will be devastating,” he added. The bill had passed unanimously and needed only ceremonial approval by the governor.

Christians in Pakistan are closely watching developments in Sindh for the implications for them in Punjab and elsewhere. That’s because the Interior Minister, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, has recently said that any belief that religious minorities in Pakistan are suffering because of the blasphemy laws is unfounded. He explained to the Senate House that data from the Sindh proved that, of 129 cases of blasphemy registered in total, 99 cases were registered against Muslims. This meant that 76% of the total convictions were against Muslims.

In response to a question by PPP parliamentarian Beelum Hasnain, Mr. Khan said: “The facts and figures reveal that, in most blasphemy cases, the accused were Muslims. They point towards the fact that religious minorities are not being embroiled in blasphemy cases more than Muslims.”

However, his statement does not take into account the fact that religious minorities are disproportionately accused of blasphemy: some say 15% are Christians, when they only form around 2% of the population, and more Christians live in Punjab than any other province.

And in Punjab, 49 of those accused of blasphemy since 1990 have so far been killed outside the judicial process, according to the Centre for Research and Security Studies in Islamabad.

External analysts are cautious about the realistic prospects of the blasphemy law being reviewed. Thomas Muller, an analyst for World Watch Research, notes: “There have been countless efforts to amend Pakistan’s blasphemy laws or at least to limit their devastating consequences, which particularly affect the country’s religious minorities. But until now, radical groups have always proved stronger – at times even killing politicians they deemed too outspoken. It remains to be seen whether these commendable political initiatives will survive the opposition – most likely violent – which can be expected from the ranks of the radical Islamic groups in the country.”

Background

In June 2014, the former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, Tassaduq Hussain Jilani, passed a landmark judgment, demanding that the government take seven measures to protect religious minorities:

1. Constitute a task force at a federal level to develop a strategy for promoting religious tolerance.
2. Develop appropriate curricula for primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education that promote religious harmony and tolerance.
3. Curb hate speech in social media.
4. Constitute a national council for minorities.
5. Establish a special police force to protect the worship places of minorities.
6. Enforce the 5 per cent minority quota in government jobs.
7. Prompt action, including registration of a criminal case, whenever constitutional rights of religious minorities are violated or their worship places are desecrated.

Dr. Sabir Michael, who teaches sociology at the University of Sindh, told World Watch Monitor that none of the seven steps have been followed.

Meanwhile, a Christian parliamentarian, Shahzad Munshi, has lodged a Minority Protection Bill in the Punjab Assembly, but the disappointing conclusion in the Sindh Assembly will dampen expectations. The other provinces have yet to even form Commissions for the rights of religious minorities.

Separately, the government shows no willingness to offer religious minorities fair representation in assemblies. There are two types of seats in the National Assembly and provincial assemblies: general seats filled through direct, and "reserved" seats filled in proportion to the seats each party wins in a general election. The "reserved" seats are for women and religious minorities.

National Assembly member Aasiya Nasir told World Watch Monitor that the total number of National Assembly seats was increased from 207 to 342 in 2002.

"There were only 12 seats for women until 2002, which were increased to 60 – but seats for religious minorities remained at 10, as decided in 1985," Nasir said.

She added that several minority Members had filed bills to increase the number of seats for minorities, but that their bills had been rejected.

"If the number is increased, then we will be better able to represent religious minorities in the [national and regional] assemblies," she said. "The National Assembly has accepted my bill to enhance the number of seats ... and referred it to the Electoral Reform Committee. But my other bill for the increase of seats in provincial assemblies has been rejected. The main opposition has come from the ruling party, PML-N, and the PPP, which rules in Sindh province."

Constitutional issue

Pakistan's constitution separates its citizens on religious grounds as either "Muslim" or "non-Muslim"; only Muslims can be elected into the roles of President or Prime Minister.

The problems for religious minorities in Pakistan date back to its formation. When the British left the Indian subcontinent, it was divided between Pakistan and India. Partition led to millions crossing borders: Muslims to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs crossing over to India. Hence, over time, India became thought of as a Hindu country and Pakistan as Muslim.

It is in this context that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's recent comments should be viewed. In October 2015, Mr. Sharif raised eyebrows when he participated in the Hindu festival of Diwali and wished the audience a "happy Diwali". And his comment about Pakistan becoming a minority-friendly country was made during his visit to a Hindu temple this month.

However, the backlash against the Sindh's Minority Protection Bill suggests there is some way to go before religious minorities in Pakistan will truly be able to feel at ease. Pakistan has risen to the 4th most dangerous country in which to live as a Christian on the 2017 World Watch List.

Pakistan acquits 112 in case of torching Christian homes over blasphemy rumour

Reuters (29.01.2017) - <http://reut.rs/2jRIMVD> - A Pakistani court acquitted 112 suspects in the 2013 torching of hundreds of Christian homes in the eastern city of Lahore over a rumour that one of the residents there had blasphemed, a lawyer said on Sunday.

In March 2013, more than 125 homes in Lahore's Josep Colony were burned by a mob of more than 3,000 Muslims responding to rumours that a local Christian man, Sawan Masih, had made derogatory remarks about the Prophet Mohammad.

No one was killed in the incident but there was widespread damage to the property of the mostly destitute Christians living in the neighbourhood. Two churches and dozens of Bibles were also desecrated in the attack.

Defence lawyer Ghulam Murtaza Chaudhry said an anti-terrorism court in Lahore had acquitted 112 people accused of torching and ransacking hundreds of houses.

"They were acquitted by the court because of lack of evidences against them," Murtaza told Reuters. "The state witnesses could not identify the accused and their statements were also contradictory."

All 112 suspects were already out on bail.

A road sweeper in his late twenties, Sawan Masih told police after his arrest on blasphemy charges that the real reason for the blasphemy allegation was a property dispute between him and a friend who spread the rumour.

In Pakistan, conviction under the blasphemy laws can carry a mandatory death sentence.

Masih was sentenced to death in 2014, a decision he has appealed.

Critics of Pakistan's blasphemy laws say they have long been used by individuals and religious groups to settle disputes.

This month, the Pakistani Senate's human rights panel said it would debate how to prevent the country's blasphemy laws being applied unfairly, the first time in decades that any parliamentary body had considered a formal proposal to stop the abuse of the blasphemy laws.

Many conservatives in Pakistan consider even criticising the laws as blasphemy, and in 2011 a Pakistani governor, Salman Taseer, was assassinated by his bodyguard after calling for reform of the laws.

His killer Mumtaz Qadri was hailed as a hero by religious hard-liners. Tens of thousands of supporters attended his funeral after he was executed last year and a shrine was built over his grave soon after his burial.

Hundreds of Pakistanis are on death row for blasphemy convictions.

Pakistani Christian accused of blasphemy after ripped Qur'an found outside home

By Asif Aqeel

World Watch Monitor (06.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2iZ7bKn> - A Pakistani Christian could face 10 years in jail or even the death sentence after torn pages from a copy of the Qur'an were found outside his home, with his name written on them.

Babu Shahbaz Masih, 40, from the Kamahan district of Lahore, was arrested on 30 December after a Muslim resident reported him to the police.

Masih's elder brother, George, a local councillor and grocer, told World Watch Monitor the police also initially arrested Shahbaz's wife and children, telling them they had been taken into custody for their safety.

George Masih, who owns the grocery shop and small piece of land adjacent to it, said his family have had a long-running dispute with the complainant, Hajji Nadeem, who allegedly "had his eye on the land".

A local human rights activist told World Watch Monitor: "The land is a corner plot, so it has business value. Local people say that Hajji had long had an eye on this small piece of land. Realising this as a potential danger, Masih had dedicated the land to the church. Hajji was jeered by some villagers afterwards. They laughed at his failure [to acquire the land], which incited him and so he sought every possible way to avenge this insult."

George Masih added: "Because Babu had acquired reputation as a faith healer, local Muslims also used to visit him, which was unacceptable to many local Muslims.

"Hajji started spreading word that Shahbaz had disrespectfully pulled his beard, which he wears because of the tradition of the Prophet, and thereby insulted the Prophet".

The activist said the evidence against Babu Masih was "unconvincing" but that, although the "situation in the area has come under control, Babu's future is bleak because, even if the court acquitted him due to lack of evidence, he would never be able to return to this place for fear of his life."

Protests follow blasphemy accusations against prominent Muslims

Meanwhile, two prominent Muslims – former cricket star Imran Khan and Shaan Taseer, the son of the Punjab governor assassinated in 2011 for the "blasphemy" of criticising the blasphemy laws – have faced angry accusations from Pakistani Islamists, following comments perceived as "insulting" to Islam and its prophet.

Taseer, the son of murdered governor Salman Taseer, was reported to police for "hate speech" after also criticising Pakistan's blasphemy laws during a filmed Christmas message shared via social media. Taseer also expressed solidarity with Asia Bibi, the Christian woman on death row for more than seven years for her "blasphemy". His father's support of Bibi was thought to be another reason for his assassination by his own bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri, who was subsequently executed.

Qadri has been hailed by some Pakistani Muslims as the most revered figure in recent history. A large shrine is under construction in his memory.

On 4 January, violent clashes erupted between police and Islamists celebrating the six-year anniversary of Taseer's murder. The protest was also seen as a reaction to Imran Khan's comments. The rally was titled "Islam Bachao", which means "Save Islam". Khan issued a public apology after demands from Tehreek Labbaik Ya-Rasool Allah, a group dedicated to safeguarding Muhammad's finality.

Leading Pakistani newspaper Dawn reported that over 150 people were arrested for participating in the rally. The protestors had clashed with police when they were prevented from marching towards the governor's former residence, where an annual vigil was taking place to mark his death.

New report on blasphemy laws

Meanwhile, in a new report, Amnesty International says Pakistan's blasphemy laws are "incompatible" with international human rights.

"The majority of blasphemy cases are based on false accusations stemming from property issues or other personal or family vendettas, rather than genuine instances of blasphemy, and they inevitably lead to mob violence against the entire community," according to the report, *'As Good As Dead: The Impact of The Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan'*.

The report also recommends that the police should be able to register cases *only* if there is sufficient evidence.

However, it notes that "in some cases, police have even arbitrarily detained family members as an attempt to locate the accused when he or she could not be found". The police, according to the report, are faced "with pressure from religious clerics and their supporters", so, in order to avert this pressure, they quickly register and "forward a case to the prosecutor on the basis of insubstantial evidence". The accused then "undergo a gruelling trial" during their detention.

Pakistani activist fears he will be killed like father after blasphemy fatwa

A Pakistani rights activist whose politician father was assassinated in 2011 for supposedly insulting Islam says he fears the same fate after a hardline religious group issued a fatwa demanding his execution and the police launched an investigation into allegations he had committed blasphemy.

By Jon Boone and Kiyya Baloch

WWRN (03.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2jktaYH> - Shaan Taseer said the Sunni Tehreek, a grouping of clerics drawn from the Barelvi movement, was "gunning for my blood and provoking people to take my life" over a Christmas video he posted on social media in which he criticised Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

His father, Salmaan Taseer, the former governor of Punjab province, was killed amid similar controversy by one of his own police guards six years ago.

The governor had infuriated hardliners with his demand for a government pardon for Asia Bibi, a poor Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy despite weak and contradictory evidence against her.

His killer, Mumtaz Qadri, became a hero, and an estimated 100,000 mourners attended his funeral following his execution last year.

The ire of the Barelvi sect, which on non-blasphemy issues is generally considered moderate, was rekindled last month after Taseer published a video expressing solidarity with people entangled in blasphemy allegations.

He called for the release of both Bibi, who remains on death row, and Nabeel Masih, a Christian teenager arrested last year for "liking" on Facebook a picture of the Kaaba in Mecca, Islam's holiest site.

Taseer also demanded the repeal of what he called the "inhumane" blasphemy laws, a longstanding demand of international human rights groups who say the laws are widely abused by people who level false allegations to settle personal scores.

The video prompted Sunni Tehreek to issue a fatwa, or religious edict, saying Taseer was liable for death because he had supposedly committed both blasphemy and apostasy.

Police in the city of Lahore also lodged a first investigation report (FIR), a document that formally starts the process of investigating a crime, under the country's blasphemy laws.

According to the FIR, police claimed to have found the video on a USB drive left outside a police station.

Mujahid Abdul Rasul, a Sunnit Tehreek cleric who demanded the police take action, said Taseer's support for Bibi and Masih meant he "was equally involved in the crime" of blasphemy.

"I don't know why the Taseer family do this again and again," he said. "His own father was killed for this so why is he also choosing the same path?"

Taseer has not been named in the FIR, with officers at Islampura police station in Lahore claiming they had not been able to confirm if it was really him in the video.

Whether or not the police pursue the matter, the mere accusation of blasphemy can be enough to incite vigilante attacks.

Taseer, who lives abroad but visits Pakistan regularly, said the Sunni Tehreek was deliberately trying to provoke its supporters in the hope that someone would mimic the killing of his father, which took place in an Islamabad market on 4 January 2011.

"On social media there are calls for another Mumtaz Qadri to deal with me and people are offering to be his successor," he said. "What they plan to do is engineer another Qadri-like assassination."

Pakistan's supreme court is due to rule on Bibi's final appeal, which was postponed in October after one of the judges recused himself from the case.