

Violations of women's rights in religious minorities in Pakistan

Conference at the Italian Parliament



LIREC (25.06.2019) – www.lirec.net – On the 18th of June 2019 Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD), in collaboration with LiREC, held a press conference at the Press room of the Italian Parliament in Rome, concerning the human rights violations faced by women belonging to religious minorities in Pakistan.

Shortly before the beginning of the Press Conference, Juliette Rierink (GHRD) was interviewed by the national Italian newspaper agency "Dire", which asked her to explain the content and the aim of the [human rights report on](#)

[Pakistan](#) published by GHRD in March 2019 – as it would be presented during the conference. Lawyer Sasuie Abbas Leghari was also interviewed and asked to report a relevant case of international protection claimed in the UK on the basis of religious discrimination suffered in Pakistan.

Speakers:

- Raffaella di Marzio – Director of the Centre for Studies on Freedom of Religion, Belief and Conscience;
- Stefano Ceccanti – Member of the Italian Parliament, constitutional lawyer and writer;
- Stefania Pucciarelli – Member of the Italian Parliament and President of the Commission for the promotion of Human Rights;
- Valeria Fedeli – Member of the Italian Parliament and member of the Commission for the Promotion of Human Rights;
- Juliette Rierink – Human Rights Officer GHRD
- Sasuie Abbas Leghari – Immigration lawyer born in Pakistan and working in the United Kingdom for the Sindh Immigration Service;
- Sara Tosoni – Legal intern at GHRD (helping with translations ITA/ENG)

Raffaella di Marzio opened the press conference by introducing the speakers and the subject of the meeting. She also thanked Stefano Ceccanti for supporting the conference, organized by LiREC and GHRD.

The constitutional lawyer, Ceccanti, stressed the importance of welcoming human rights monitoring initiatives within the Italian political institutions, as technical knowledge about the worldwide human rights situation is the precondition for properly carrying out parliamentary duties.

Stefania Pucciarelli said she was honoured to receive the invitation to the Conference, as the information related to

the topic could be worthy for the Italian Commission of human rights, which is currently working on the issue of forced marriages and the protection of both religious minorities and women's rights.

Valeria Fedeli added that the promotion and the protection of minority rights is a fundamental national duty, as the situation of minority groups in a country often reflects the State's overall commitment to European and international human rights obligations. Raffaella di Marzio took to the floor, reporting the efforts of LiREC in demanding the Italian Parliament to uphold the European Union Guidelines on freedom of religion or belief entirely. These Guidelines require the EU Member States to take external actions against all religious human rights violations, wherever they occur.

Raffaella di Marzio introduced Global Human Rights Defence, noting that its human rights report 2019 has been taken up, in its entirety, by the Members of the European Parliament, who called on Pakistan to take effective measures to safeguard religious minorities' rights on its territory.

Religious minorities in Pakistan

Juliette Rierink introduced the work of Global Human Rights Defence, an NGO which focuses on the development of minority rights in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Through both policy-change and society-building strategies, GHRD contributes to change by human rights monitoring and investigation, lobbying and advocacy and empowerment of the local population. Juliette Rierink presented the 2019 GHRD human rights report on Pakistan, which specifically concerns the violations against women belonging to religious minorities (Christians, Hindus, Ahmadiyyas, Sikhs and Shias).

Girls belonging to these minority groups face abduction, rape, forced conversion and forced marriage committed by extremists of the Muslim majority community. These disturbing facts have

caused the number of religious minorities in Pakistan to decrease from 23% of the population in 1947, to only 3.7% in 2017. Juliette concluded her speech by calling on the international community to come together and urge Pakistan to work towards the sustainable and effective implementation of religious minority rights.

Sasuié Abbas Leghari began to speak by stressing how, in the cases of forced conversions, the victims are abducted and then subject to emotional and physical abuse. The police often refuse to record a first investigation report, and additionally, both the lower and high court of Pakistan fail to follow the proper procedure. Investigations are absent or insufficient and most of the time the police and media simply chose to believe the account of abductor.

During the conference, the short GHRD documentary 'Girls of Pakistan' was screened. This documentary showed the effects of discrimination, forced conversions and blasphemy law in Pakistan. The documentary was mostly focused on a march facilitated by GHRD and held in The Hague on International Women's Day 2019. Civil society, activists and politicians gathered together to raise awareness about the issue of forced conversions in Pakistan and to submit a petition organised by GHRD to the Dutch Parliament.

Questions during the press conference

The first question was raised by Elisabetta Nistri, President of the Women's Federation for World Peace – Italy, who asked: through which mechanisms does GHRD interact with the United Nations? Juliette Rierink replied that GHRD has ECOSOC status and is able to actively participate in the UN Human Rights Council Session, therefore GHRD can keep human rights violations in South Asia on the UN agenda. Additionally, cases are often sent through the UN urgent appeal mechanisms, and GHRD are in regular contact with Special Rapporteurs.

Thereafter Gioia Li gave an account of the persecution that members of religious communities face in China by the Government. She also addressed the speakers in order to know how to raise awareness about this severe human rights situation in China among the international community and how to produce effective policy changes. To answer to this question, and subsequently to conclude the press conference, Juliette Rierink, Sasuie Leghari and Raffaella di Marzio stressed the importance of empowerment and education in order for human rights and equality to be effectively implemented.

The plight of minorities – as with other vulnerable categories – essentially derives from the biased and dangerous conception of considering some human beings as inferior and unequal. This is the reason why it is fundamental to create a culture of humanity, equality and tolerance in order to stand up for human rights globally in name of their universality.

BANGLADESH: 50 Ahmadiyyas injured in co-ordinated attack on the community in Panchagarh

Islamists vandalized and torched the houses owned by Ahmadiyyas to protest the minority group holding its annual 'jalsha,' a probe committee has been formed to investigate the attack

By Sazzadur Rahman Sazzad

Dhaka Tribune (13.02.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2Hc8nWt> – Around 50 people have been injured in co-ordinated attacks by hardline Islamist groups on minority Ahmadiyyas in Panchagarh over holding of a “jalsha”, despite the local authorities cancelling the annual convention of the minority group.

The attacks took place on Tuesday night on the streets of Ahmadnagar, the part of town where members of the minority Muslim sect have their homes and businesses, confirmed Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Panchagarh police station Abu Akkas.

The incident occurred between 9pm and 11pm. The injured have been admitted to Rangpur Medical College and Hospital.

The district authorities on Tuesday cancelled the three-day “jalsha”, which was scheduled to begin on February 22, amid protests from conservative Muslim groups.

A five-member probe committee has been formed to look into Tuesday’s attack.

The committee constituted with additional district magistrate Ehtesham Reza as its head has been asked to submit its report within three days.

Meanwhile, teams of the district administration and police administration visited the area on Wednesday and talked to the

followers of the community.

Besides, police and Border Guard Bangladesh members have been deployed in the area to fend off further trouble.

Meanwhile, Shah Ahmed Shafi, the de facto leader of the hardline Islamists in Bangladesh and the inspirational leader of the umbrella organization Hefazat-e-Islam, has demanded the Ahmadiyya Muslim community declared as non-Muslims, immediately.

He also demanded the three-day Ahmadiyya religious congregation—scheduled to begin on February 22 in Panchagarh district—be stopped.

Shafi made the demand on Wednesday during a press briefing at Al-Jamiatul Ahlia Darul Ulum Moinul Islam, also known as Hathazari Madrasa, in Chittagong.

While speaking at the press briefing, Shafi said that they will be compelled to undertake tougher responses, like a long march towards Panchagarh, if the congregation is not stopped.

“The demand to declare the Ahmadiyyas as non-Muslims is part of protecting the fundamental principles of Islam. Muslims [will] face various problems in their social and religious life if the Ahmadiyyas are not identified and declared as non-Muslims,” said Shafi.

Islamists do not consider the Ahmadiyyas- also known as Qadianis- to be Muslim and have called for them to be banned. The 1,00,000 Ahmadiyyas in Bangladesh have faced repeated attacks and are often barred from establishing mosques. The group is banned in Pakistan.

Rangpur Additional Divisional Commissioner Abdullah Sajjad, Pachagarh Deputy Commissioner Sabina Yasmin, Superintendent of Police Md Ghiasuddin Ahmed, and other officials inspected the scene of the incident and visited the injured.

They gave assurances of bringing to book those involved with the attacks. Police and BGB have been deployed in Ahmadnagar to keep the situation under control.

Ahmadiyya leaders protest attack

Leaders of the community protest the attack on their people, their houses and businesses in Panchagarh.

Nayeb-e-ameer of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Ahmed Tabshir Chowdhury, at a a press briefing in Salana Jalsha field in Ahmed Nagar in the afternoon, claimed at least seven of the Muslim minority were injured, three critically.

He urged the government to take immediate action against the criminals who organized and carried out the attacks.

Among others, Mawlan Abdul Awal Khan Chowdhury, in-charge of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Mollabek, Taher Jugal, president of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Panchagarh unit and Shafiqul Islam, president of Panchagarh Press club also spoke at the programme.

How the clashes began

Around 8pm on Tuesday, followers of conservative groups under the banners of Khatm-e-Nubuwwat Shongrokkhon Parishad, Iman Akida Raksha Committee, Islami Jubo Samaj and local Towhidi Janata – all protesting the celebration of the “jalsha” – started a procession.

After the procession ended, the protesters blocked the Dhaka-Panchagarh highway near Sher-e-Bangla Park intersection in Panchagarh town.

At that time, traffic on both sides of the highway came to a halt. When the protestors tried to march towards Ahmadnagar, police blocked their path on Korotoa Bridge.

Enraged, the protestors started throwing brickbats at the police, who used rubber bullets and teargas to calm the situation.

A chase and counter-chase ensued between the protestors and

the law enforcers that lasted for one and a half hours, injuring people on both sides.

At one point, a group of protestors broke away and advanced to Ahmadnagar, where they vandalized and set fire to several houses of the Ahmadiyyas, injuring at least 40 people of the minority group.

“Around 40 of our people have been injured,” Ahmadnagar Muslim Convention President Taher claimed. “Our women were forcibly brought out to the streets and harassed. Our houses and furniture at the jalsha meeting site were vandalized and torched.”

Movement in the area was disrupted from 9pm to 11pm, while local shops remain closed fearing further violence.

The last few decades have seen a number of attacks targeting Ahmadiyyas in Bangladesh.

In 1999, a bomb ripped through an Ahmadiyya mosque in the southern city of Khulna, killing at least eight worshippers.

In 2015, a suicide blast by a suspected Islamist extremist at an Ahmadiyya mosque in Rajshahi's Bagmara, wounded three people.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attack, but the authorities blamed the home-grown militant group a faction of Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), known as New JMB to the authorities, which is accused of killing scores of religious minorities including Hindus, Christians, Sufi Muslims and Shias.

Clashes despite cancellation of Jalsha

The anti-Ahmadiyya group carried out the attacks on Ahmadnagar, despite assurances from the local administration that the “jalsha” had been cancelled.

The Ahmadiyya’s annual convention was slated to be held from February 22-24. On February 4, Khatm-e-Nubuwwat Shongrokkhon Parishad held a press briefing at the Panchagarh press club to place their demands for cancelling the “jalsha”.

At 8pm on Tuesday, leaders from Towhidhi Janata and other organizations met at the deputy commissioner’s office, where the decision to cancel the event was announced.

Despite that, a group of protesters went to Ahmadnagar and attacked Ahmadiyya houses and the convention site, OC Abu Akkas said.

Finally, Additional Deputy Commissioner Md Golam Azam announced the cancellation decision through a loudspeaker from Panchagarh Bazar mosque and requested everyone to go back home

around 11pm.

“The district administration decided to cancel the jalsha on Tuesday night,” the OC said. “However, even before the announcement, followers of conservative groups and locals started demonstrating on the streets.

“Police fired rubber bullets and lobbed teargas shells to bring the situation under control,” the OC added. “But a portion of the protesters still went to Ahmadnagar and attacked the minority group.”

Superintendent of Police Md Ghiasuddin Ahmed said the police are investigating the incident. “A scattered group of the conservatives carried out the attacks. We are looking into the matter and will take legal action against those responsible.”

Deputy Commissioner Sabina Yasmin said: “The Sunnis demanded cancellation of the convention. Even though we agreed to their demands and took the decision to cancel the jalsha, they engaged in acts of violence. We will take steps against that.”

Medical officer of Panchagarh Sadar Hospital Dr Pradip Kumar Banik said among the 21 injured admitted to the hospital, one of them is in critical condition.

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