

PAKISTAN: Christians, Hindus and Muslims from Lahore: We need a law against forced conversions

By Shafique Khokhar

Asia News (03.04.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2CRQpFB> – Every year in the country at least 1,000 minority girls are forced to recant their faith and convert to Islam. Christian demonstrator: “It is a disgrace that forcible conversions are not considered a violation of human rights”. Activists of religious groups and civil society also demonstrated in Faisalabad.

We need “a law against the frequent episodes of kidnapping, forced conversions and forced marriages of Hindu women and girls, Christians and other religious minorities”. Pakistani Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and lay activists organized a Protest Camp in Lahore, facing the Punjab Assembly on March 30th, while a similar event took place in Faisalabad (see video) .

The initiative is inspired by the abduction of two Hindu sisters, forcibly converted and forced to marry two Muslim men. The participants affirm: “The minorities are afraid. A law must be passed to eliminate forced conversions “.

The phenomenon is not new and has deep roots in the rigid radical Muslim mentality and patriarchal traditions. According to the most recent surveys, every year at least 1,000 girls are forced to recant their faith and adhere to Islam. In the last 40 days this fate has happened to nine minors belonging to Hindu and Christian minorities.

The protest rally was led by Rwadari Tehreek [*Inter-religious Movement for Tolerance*, ed.], In collaboration with various religious and civil society associations. Activists call for the arrest of Mian Mithu, guardian of Barchundi Sharif in Ghotki district, and Ayub Jan Sarhandi, of Sarhandi mosque in Umerkot district. These are influential Islamic religious leaders, implicated in numerous cases of abduction and conversion, against which no provision has ever been adopted.

Samson Salamar, president of Rwadari Tehreek, says: "This horrible trend leaves minorities in a state of misery, pain, terror and insecurity. All this goes against international standards on human rights and against the Constitution of Pakistan, which guarantees religious freedom to every human being without discrimination".

Saeeda Diep, president of the *Institute for Peace and Secular Studies*, adds: "Conversions to Islam in suspicious circumstances are a source of grave concern and spread even more terror and anger among minorities, already victims of other discriminatory forms".

According to Tariq Siraj, head of *Human Rights Concern Network*, "we need to launch an awareness campaign in civil society". For Katherine Sapna Karamat, director of Christians 'True Spirit,' it is a misfortune that many do not consider conversions extracted by force as a violation of human rights".

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SYRIA: 'Next time we will not survive' – Middle East Christian refugee

World Watch Monitor (12.11.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2QJj9F0> – As many as 80% of Syria's Christians have left their country since the start of the civil war in 2011, while 50% of Iraq's Christians have been uprooted since 2006, according to a report produced by Christian charities Open Doors International, Served and Middle East Concern in June last year. The arrival of IS was only the "tipping point" of a trend already gathering pace as Christians experienced an "overall loss of hope for a safe and secure future", the report said.

Lebanon received the most refugees and in December 2016 the advocacy group ADF International heard some of their stories, which they have now shared with World Watch Monitor. In the snippets below, the interviewees are referred to by their initials alone, to preserve their safety.

"We lived in Mosul [northern Iraq] until 2005 [when] bullets were shot into our home. Between June and July, 2005,

terrorists tried to kidnap our son three times, but he was able to escape,” said S. H., a Christian father of five, adding that after this he moved with his family, including three disabled children, to Qaraqosh, 30km southeast of Mosul.

Three months after Islamic State arrived there, on 6 August 2014, the family fled again. “They gave us three options: conversion, death or jizya [a special tax for non-Muslims],” said S. H., adding that this time they fled to Lebanon – because “it is Christian and Arab-speaking”.

Another man, a 43-year-old father of two girls, identified by his first initial, N., fled to Lebanon in February 2015 after IS gave him 24 hours written notice to leave Baghdad, his job and his home, or he and his family would be killed.

“My relatives – my cousin and his grandparents – were killed by bombings at their home, because they didn’t want to quit their job or convert. Colleagues of mine were kidnapped. Some were freed for US\$16,000, others were killed. They were told they must deny Jesus or they would be killed,” he said.

It is difficult to assess how many people have been killed by IS but mass graves were found last week, some of which contained thousands of bodies.

‘Christians must not be alive’

For 70 years another Christian family, identified as S. and H.K., had resided in the city of Hasakah, northeast Syria,

where they lived at peace with their Muslim neighbours, S. told ADF. All that changed with the arrival of Islamic State.

“Our neighbours joined IS [and the group] used [them] to communicate with us [that we had] three options: convert, leave, or die. They burned our farm at night to kill us, but we were not there. We escaped, going from village to village. We have two brothers, but now we don’t know anything about them. We have had no contact since we fled,” S. said.

A 71-year-old Catholic Christian, identified as H. S. H., recalls how he and his brother fled Aleppo, Syria on 27 December 2013, to find refuge at his farm in Raqqa, only to find further danger. “Our taxi driver was shot in the neck. My brother and I were assaulted and then locked up in the chicken stag pen, a dark room. We were locked up for three days. This was the last time I saw my brother. Our captors wanted to know if we were the owners of the farm. They stole my money. My neighbours later told me that this was IS,” he said.

“We were fed dog food, and they told me that Christians must not be alive. We were told: convert to Islam, or be killed. They told me if I converted, they would give the farm back to me. The jizya was also an option. But some of my neighbours, who were Armenian, were killed after paying jizya.”

He said he was able to escape when the Syrian army attacked IS, with the help of his Muslim neighbours, and that he fled to Lebanon as he had heard the UN could help him. “I have waited three years. The UN has not helped me directly. I had an interview at the French embassy; they told me it would take

20 days to get back to me. It has been two months," he said.

At the time of the interview he lived with friends in Beirut and had survived three heart attacks. "I do not want to go back to Raqqa or Aleppo," he said. "I have had too much trauma and could never go back. I don't want to remember what happened. It is too difficult."

Psychological trauma

The same is true for a Chaldean Christian family from Batnaya, northern Iraq. They had not been able to flee because of illness in the family, when IS entered the town in August 2014. Militants came to their house repeatedly, threatening to rape and kill them if they would not convert or if they called on anyone for help.

"After 22 days, IS took our whole family into El Sharkat prison in Mosul and stole everything we had," the 63-year-old father, identified as G. H. G., said.

"[They] separated my 14-year-old son and me from my wife, daughter and our handicapped child. I thought they would kill my son and me, and I did not know what would happen to my family. After four days they took my son and me to another prison, in Kirkuk, where we were for five days until they released us. In the meantime, [my wife] had been released from prison because of our handicapped child. She took our daughter and our handicapped child to a church in Kirkuk. This is where we were reunited."

Fearing for their lives, they fled to Beirut, but he said his daughter has psychological trauma and that they will never go back: "We escaped death by a miracle ... Next time we will not survive."

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SUDAN: Police in Sudan arrest Christians at school, prevent others from leaving

Take-over of evangelical institution leads to obstruction accusations.

Morning Star News (30.03.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2ovfMq4> – Police accused staff members of a Christian school in Sudan of obstructing the work of a Muslim-owned business trying to take it over, sources said.

Police in Omdurman, across from Khartoum on the Nile River, on Monday (March 27) arrested 12 staff members of a Christian school and the next day prevented others from leaving the campus, they said.

In an apparent attempt to help the Muslim investor take over the Evangelical School of Sudan, police first arrested two leaders of the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPEC) – the Rev. Idris Karntina and an elder identified only as Younan – at about 10 a.m. An hour later two police vans arrived at the school complex, and officers arrested 10 other Christians, including women, all SPEC members, church leaders said.

They were taken to Omdurman's central division police station and released at about 8 p.m., accused of obstructing the work of Education Vision, which is trying to take over the school. The institution is still functioning as a Christian school, but representatives of Education Vision are regularly disrupting classes, school personnel said.

The following morning, police along with National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) officers prevented Christian teachers, including the headmaster, to leave the school, which is owned by SPEC. Teachers at the school together with other SPEC members held a prayer meeting inside, until they were allowed to leave that evening.

The Rev. Yahia Abdelrahim Nalu, SPEC moderator, was inside the school during the staff members' confinement.

"We expect the arrests to continue," Nalu said.

On March 16 about 20 policemen aboard a truck forcefully entered the school compound, arrested three Christian teachers

including the headmaster, Daud Musa, and took them to Omdurman's central division police station, sources said. Also arrested were Christian teachers Yahya Elias and elder Younan, all of the SPEC.

They were released on bail after eight hours, charged with obstructing the work of those attempting to take over the school.

The arrests came nearly a month after authorities arrested and held overnight four educators from the same school, including Musa, before releasing them on bail. They were accused of destroying a sign belonging to Education Vision. The Christians strongly denied the accusation.

The Evangelical School of Sudan is one of several SPEC schools throughout Sudan.

The leadership of the SPEC remains in the hands of government-appointed committee members even after a court ruled in November 2016 that the appointments were illegal, sources said. That case is separate from an Aug. 31, 2015 ruling by the Administrative Court of Appeal saying the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments interfered with SPEC's Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church by imposing committees on the church in order to enable Muslim investors to take it over.

Harassment, arrests and persecution of Christians have intensified since the secession of South Sudan in July 2011, when President Omar al-Bashir vowed to adopt a stricter version of *sharia* (Islamic law) and recognize only Islamic culture and the Arabic language. The Sudanese Minister of Guidance and Endowments announced in April 2013 that no new licenses would be granted for building new churches in Sudan, citing a decrease in the South Sudanese population.

Due to its treatment of Christians and other human rights violations, Sudan has been designated a Country of Particular

Concern by the U.S. State Department since 1999, and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended the country remain on the list in its 2016 report.

Sudan ranked fifth on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2017 World Watch List of countries where Christians face most persecution.

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TUNISIA: Tunisians demand change to Muslim marriage decree

Arab News (27.03.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2nPF8R> – An alliance of Tunisian human rights groups on Monday called on authorities to scrap a 1973 decree that bans Muslim women from marrying non-Muslims.

The alliance of some 60 groups signed a statement calling for the decree to be revoked, saying it undermines “a fundamental human right: which is the right to choose a spouse.”

Sana Ben Achour, president of the Beity association, told a news conference “it is inadmissible today for a simple decree, which has almost no judicial value... to command the lives of thousands.”

The decree issued in 1973 by the justice ministry stipulates that a non-Muslim man who wishes to marry a Tunisia woman must convert to Islam and submit a certificate of his conversion as proof.

Wahid Ferchichi, of the Adli association for the defense of individual liberties, said the decree violates Tunisia’s constitution which promotes equality between all citizens, regardless of gender.

The coalition said it would mount a campaign to mobilize public opinion and seek meetings with the ministers of justice, interior and the head of government, hoping the decree will be scrapped by November.

Tunisia is viewed as being ahead of most Arab countries on women’s rights.

The North African country and birthplace of Arab Spring protests that ousted several regional autocratic, adopted a new constitution in 2014 which guarantees equality between men and women.

Article 21 of the constitution states: "All citizens, male and female, have equal rights and duties, and are equal before the law without any discrimination."

But discrimination against women in Tunisia remains rife, particularly in matters of inheritance and the country's Code of Personal Status designates the man as the head of a family.

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Pakistan: 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 (02.07.2017) – <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.

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