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## **Lahore church burnt in suspicious circumstances alleged to be arson attack**

British Pakistani Christian Association (11.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1RljD27> - New Apostolic church in Batth village, 80 km away from Lahore on the Multan road was burnt after a new year celebration on Wednesday 6th January. The incident has created great suspicion and fear amongst the local Christian community who believe it was a religious attack.

The local Pastor Yaqoob Saraoya described how he had shut the church at around 12:00am and received a call only an hour later that the building was ablaze. He arrived back at the church within minutes and with local Christian villagers was able to put out the fire within an hour, with no assistance from the local fire service.

Believing it was an act of arson in response to the exuberance of their worship and celebrations, Pastor Yaqoob called the local Manga Police Station. The Station Head Officer (SHO) Afzal Sindu arrived with other officers within a few minutes and undertook a very short investigation. The Police suggested the fire was initiated by a short circuit rather than an arson attack and refused to lodge a First Incident Report for a crime, stating it must have been an accident. However, Kasur a nearby town was the location of the attack of Shama and Shahzad who were burnt alive by a mob of in excess of 3000 in November 2014 (click here), moreover a church had already been subjected to an arson attack in the nearby Victory Church of Kasur on the day of Epiphany on 6th January (click here).

Dildar Bhatti a local resident living next to the church building said:

"I showed police officials suspicious marks on the wall of the church that illustrated someone had climbed the church wall to gain entry to our church, but the Police officers just ignored my evidence and did not add the detail to their reports. Local police officials do not cooperate with villagers."

Karamat Masih, a local resident said:

"All the local Christians are now in great fear, the fire illustrates that Christians are not wanted in the local area."

Pastor Yaqoob is concerned about the loss of tents and other utensils that were hired for the celebration. The church has also lost much of their furniture and upholstery, including two sofas, chairs and carpets that was burnt. He has estimated that the church will face a bill of up to 100,000 rupees the equivalent of £654.67

Shamim Masih our lead reporter said:

"When I went there local residents had heaped the burnt items in a pile and many parishioners were praying there. They have re-painted the outside wall of the church, coming together as a community to restore their place of worship. There are more than 1000 Christians living in the village and in this particular colony there are more than fifty families. Most of the Christians are bonded labourers and earn their living through modern day slavery in different sectors including local brick kilns and carpet making factories. This recent attack has placed great fear into all the local Christians"

Wilson Chowdhry, Chairman of the BPCA, said:

"Despite promises of reform and change the situation for Christians living in Pakistan only worsens. Inculcation of hatred towards minorities in national Curriculum text books

that demonise and caricature people outside of Islam, have only served to polarise society creating great schism. There are protections for minorities in both the constitution and legal frameworks yet these are often obviated by officials steeped in the same hatred. Failure by the west to improve this situation for minorities through accountable use of foreign aid budget, has only exacerbated the situation. This has culminated in the quality of life for Christians in Pakistan reaching a nadir."

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## **Muslim man caught burning copies of Bible in Kasur Church**

British Pakistani Christian Association (11.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1RljD27> - Parishioners of Victory Church in Kasur were horrified to see a young Muslim man burning their church bibles, when they arrived at their church to pray during the day of Epiphany on Wednesday 6th January.

Akba Azhar a 26 year old Muslim apparently had broken into their church and burnt their bibles and other Christian books including worship and Bible study material. Realising he had been discovered Mr Azhar tried to flee but was caught by young Christian men who brought him back to the church and held him there until local Policemen arrived, in response to their calls for assistance.

On arrival the Police took the man into custody, but later refused to file a First Incident Report (Police report) against the perpetrator, stating that Mr Azhar was deemed to be mentally unstable, therefore unfit for prosecution. However, Parishioners at the church have advised local Police that they believe the man is both lucid and mentally stable and had been playing Cricket with some of the Christian men the night before the burglary and arson attack. They have demanded that Mr Azhar should be tried under the notorious blasphemy laws of Pakistan as the man has desecrated Christian scriptures, in the same fashion as the laws have been used against Christians.

Pastor Nasir, of Victory Church, said:

"The reticence of the local police constabulary to prosecute Mr Azhar illustrates their bias. Several mentally ill Christians have been arrested for blasphemy including 11 year old Rimsha Masih in 2012, who was visibly a minor with a severe condition. Local Police in Kasur have informed the church that due to Azhbar's mental condition he can not be held liable for his actions. This is very unfair" ([click here](#)).

Kasur is a city of nearly 250,000 people and approximately 60 km from Lahore, in Pakistan's Punjab province. In November 2014, the area was the scene of a brutal attack on a young Christian couple, parents of four children, who were burnt alive by a Muslim mob, incited by an imam after allegations of blasphemy were made against the victims. Only hours after this incident a church another church in Kasur was set on fire ([click here](#))

Despite protections within the Constitution and legal frameworks of Pakistan, Christians rarely receive justice. Article 36 of the Pakistani Constitution states:

36. Protection of minorities.-The State shall safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minorities, including their due representation in the Federal and Provincial services.

Wilson Chowdhry, Chairman of the BPCA, said:

"This latest attack and the ease within which the felon Mr Azhar was allowed to escape justice, underlines the low worth of Christians in Pakistan. Pakistan has a well documented, extremely poor human rights record especially towards minorities living there, yet still attain mass foreign aid from America and Britain. The ongoing pariah status of minorities in Pakistan is a concern big enough to warrant cessation of all US and UK funding. Their choice to continue is dangerous considering that festering hatred towards the West in Pakistan has led to the export of terrorism."

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## **Christian brick kiln workers suffer police brutality**

Britishpakistanchristians.org (27.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1TfTW02> - On 21st November 2015 seven Christian brick kiln workers were detained and mercilessly beaten by local police after they were stopped and searched during their rickshaw journey home. Police officials allegedly snatched the impoverished workers' salaries for the week which amounted to just 16700 rupees (£100) in total. The men were then illegally arrested without any charges and had to be bailed out on the guarantee of local community leaders.

Allah Rakha (47 years), his sons Asif (25 years) and Khurram (17 years) along with four other co-villagers Sittar Masih (38 years), his son Naeem (25 years) a serving army personnel, Tariq Masih (30 years) and Nadeem Masih (28 years), had all been working at Allah Towaqal Bricks Company located at Adha Sukhaira in the district of Sumandri.

Allaha Rakha told BPCA representative Shamim Masih that they were travelling home by rickshaw late at night after a hard day's toil when three police officials: Assistant Sub Inspector (ASI) Barkat Ali, ASI Allah Dita, and constable Mohammad Razaq stopped them for no apparent reason, citing routine inspection. The officers asked them their personal details and the details of their journey. The seven men provided all they were asked, but noticed a change in the police behaviour on sharing their Christian names. The officers suddenly turned more aggressive and conducted a search during which they found the pittance of weekly wages paid to the hard working brick kiln labourers which amounted to a measly £100 between them. Despite remonstrations that the money was their weekly wages, the police officers starting beating the innocent men accusing them of being Christian drug dealers and robbers. They then proceeded to arrest the men illegally and detained them at Thirkani Police Station in Sumandri.

Allah Rakha said:

*"We pleaded with them for mercy explaining we were just poor bricklayers returning to our homes at Chack 226. We told them that our employer could explain where we obtained our money, but they still beat us with their batons extremely severely. Even when we cried and lay on the floor they continued to beat us, filled with hatred that we were Christians with some money. We were put in a cell and despite our severe wounds they provided no medical aid and we sat in pain, bleeding, our wounds open to infection. I led everyone in prayer believing God would release us just as He did with Paul. God answered our prayers after a couple of hours when police staff allowed us to call our community leaders Irfan Masih and Riaz Masih who were able to act as guarantors for us enabling our release and return home."*

He added:

*"When we all eventually arrived home our women wept as they saw our wounds. They tended to us and helped us recover, however we have all been badly traumatised and have not yet been back to work. We hope to start back on Monday if our employers have not already given our work away. The police officers have not yet returned our money and we do not know if we will ever get our wages back. We are already poor but this*

*attack destroys our already hard to manage finances. I have seven children, two daughters and five sons. Two of my sons work with me in the brick kilns to feed our family, none of my children ever went to school as we could not afford it. Our lives have been worthless but we thank God for them even then."*

Irfan and Riaz have appointed a lawyer Akmal Bhatti who has now submitted an application to the Central Police Officer (CPO) against the 'inhumane behaviour' of the police authorities. Initially there was no response from the local police station so many Christians staged a mass protest rally outside the station on Monday calling for an end to the discriminatory attitude of police authorities towards religious minorities.

Irfan Masih, a local human rights activist, told the BPCA:

*"The Senior Superintendent Police (SSP) Malik Shahid has ordered that an inquiry be held against the police officials involved in this inhuman attack. As a community we will fight against the discrimination and brutality of police authorities towards Christians."*

Wilson Chowdhry, Chairman of the BPCA, said:

*"Police brutality towards Christians is no secret. We have reported on four suspicious deaths of Christians within police custody during our tenure as a humanitarian NGO, and sadly expect that many others will occur (click here). Lack of interest towards complaints by the Christian minority has created a recognised level of impunity that has exacerbated the situation. The current refusal by police officers to even register an FIR in most cases raised by Christians illustrates that western nation assessments of 'sufficiency of protection' are flawed at best, yet without the influence of Pakistan's big sponsors i.e. Britain, the European Union and the USA the current status quo will continue or reach a nadir. People across the globe simply have to challenge their politicians to intervene on behalf of Pakistani Christians or eventually this attrition will lead to the eradication of Christians in Pakistan."*

**Photos here:** <http://bit.ly/1TfTW02>

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## **Ahmadi place of worship set ablaze in Jhelum, riots erupt after blasphemy allegations**

Dawn.com (21.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1MzBjCB> - An enraged mob set a Ahmadi place of worship on fire in Punjab's Jhelum district on Saturday, following Friday night's arson attack on a factory.

The place of worship was located in the Kala Gujran area of Jhelum, which was under guard of local police forces.

The mob managed to break through the police cordon which was established to safeguard the Ahmadi places of worship, following Friday night's unrest.

Police had to resort to baton charging and tear gassing the protesters in order to bring the situation under control, but were unable to do so. The mob resorted to pelting stones at the police personnel.

The incidents were a result of rumours circulated earlier in Jhelum district which levelled blasphemy allegations on the owner and workers of the factory.

***Army contingent called in***

As tensions rose, a contingent of the Pakistan Army was called in to assist the local police forces.

After the arrival of the army contingent, the situation calmed down, with the mob chanting slogans in favour of the army.

Lieutenant Colonel Khurram of the Pakistan Army negotiated with the mob.

### ***Factory set on fire***

Earlier, an enraged mob set a factory on fire in Jhelum district late on Friday after rumours circulated in the area and announcements were made from mosques levelling blasphemy allegations on the factory owner and workers. No casualties were reported from the arson attack.

Hundreds of people surrounded the chipboard factory in Jhelum and set the facility ablaze after reports surfaced that one employee had allegedly desecrated the Holy Quran.

"The incident took place after we arrested the head of security at the factory, Qamar Ahmed Tahir, for complaints that he ordered burning of the copies of the Holy Quran," Adnan Malik, a senior police official in the area, told AFP.

According to police, another employee at the factory had reported that Tahir was overseeing the burning in the facility's boiler and intervened to stop the act.

"We registered a blasphemy case against Tahir, who is Ahmadi by faith, and arrested him after confiscating the burnt material, which also included copies of the Holy Quran," Malik said.

Four other men who were previously arrested on suspicion of blasphemy were reportedly released by the police, DawnNews reported.

After this, certain people in the area approached local mosques to make announcements through loudspeakers against the release following which people not only from the immediate vicinity but even from nearby villages gathered as a mob and set ablaze the chipboard factory.

The owner's residence, adjoining the factory, was also set on fire.

The mob later moved to the Grand Trunk Road, blocked the route and chanted slogans against the police. Members of the mob also clashed with police personnel as the latter tried to disperse the crowd.

Police fired rubber bullets and fired tear gas shells at the mob, members of which resorted to aerial firing. Three men were reportedly injured in this unrest. However, there were few policemen on the scene who thereby failed to control the situation.

District Police Officer (DPO) Mujhaid Akbar Khan reached the location and tried talking to members of the mob but that did not yield any results.

Subsequently, armed forces' personnel were called in and GT Road was opened for traffic some six hours after the disturbance.

A spokesman for the local Ahmadi community said three of their members were arrested in the wake of the fire.

"Three members of our community have been arrested by police under the charges of blasphemy," Saleemuddin told AFP

### ***Sensitive issue***

Blasphemy is a hugely sensitive issue in Pakistan, with even unproven allegations often prompting mob violence and killings.

Ahmadis were declared non-Muslims by the Pakistani government in 1974.

Ahmadis have been arrested in Pakistan for reading the Holy Quran, holding religious celebrations and having Quranic verses on rings or wedding cards. Four years ago, 86 Ahmadis were killed in two simultaneous attacks in Lahore.

Pakistan's controversial blasphemy law does not clearly define blasphemy but says the offence is punishable by death. Anyone can file a blasphemy case claiming their religious feelings are injured for any reason.

The accused are often lynched, and lawyers and judges defending or acquitting them have been attacked. Rights groups say the laws are increasingly used to seize money or property.

Eleven members of the sect were murdered for their faith in 2014 and authorities failed to apprehend any of the killers, a report said in April, highlighting growing intolerance toward the community.

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## **Pakistan report: 'Blasphemy' trials fundamentally unfair**

Freedomdeclared.org (10.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1HxLKr4> - People accused of violating Pakistan's draconian 'blasphemy laws' face proceedings that are glaringly flawed, said the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) in a new report published last week.

"Pakistan's blasphemy laws fly in the face of Pakistan's international legal obligations, including the duties to respect the rights of freedom of expression and freedom of religion and belief," said Sam Zarifi, ICJ's Asia Director. "But even worse, those facing accusations of blasphemy suffer through trials that are often fundamentally unfair."

In the 60-page report [On Trial: the Implementation of Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws](#), the ICJ has documented in detail systematic and widespread fair trial violations in proceedings related to blasphemy offences in Pakistan, particularly in trial courts.

Some of the problems documented in the report include:

- Intimidation and harassment of judges and lawyers that impede on the independence of the judiciary and the right to a defence;
- Demonstrable bias and prejudice against defendants by judges during the course of blasphemy proceedings and in judgements;
- Violations of the right to effective assistance of counsel;
- Rejection of bail and prolonged pre-trial detention;
- Incompetent investigation and prosecution that do not meet due diligence requirements under the law;
- The prosecution and detention of people living with mental disabilities;
- Inhumane conditions of detention and imprisonment, including prolonged solitary confinement.

Pakistan's laws on 'offences related to religion' – sections 295-298-C of the Penal Code that are commonly known as "blasphemy laws" – include a variety of crimes including misusing religious epithets, "defiling" the Holy Quran, deliberately outraging religious sentiment, and using derogatory remarks in respect of the Prophet Muhammad.

Sentences for these offences range from fines to long terms of imprisonment, and in the case of defamation of the Prophet Muhammad (section 295-C), a mandatory death sentence.

"Section 295 is a relic of the British colonial system that lends itself to human rights violations, including in Pakistan, India, Myanmar, and elsewhere," Zarifi said. "In Pakistan, General Zia-ul-Haq made additions to the laws that made them truly draconian."

Based on the analysis of over 100 judgements of the high courts and courts of first instance from 1986-2015 as well as interviews with defendants in blasphemy cases, their families, and defence counsel; judges, lawyers and police officials; and human rights activists, the report found:

- In 19 out of 25 cases under section 295-C (defamation of the Prophet Muhammad) studied by the ICJ, high courts have acquitted individuals convicted for blasphemy by trial courts. Glaring procedural irregularities and *mala fide* complaints are the grounds for acquittal on appeal in over 80 per cent of cases;
- Even in cases that ultimately result in acquittal, blasphemy proceedings suffer from undue delay – proceedings in trial courts can take on average three years, and appeals can take even longer, more than five years on average;
- Individuals accused of blasphemy under section 295-C are frequently denied bail even though they meet requirements under the law;
- Individuals detained pending trial or convicted for blasphemy are often kept in prolonged solitary confinement, at times, over a number of years.

The report also confirms concerns recently raised by the Supreme Court of Pakistan that individuals accused of blasphemy 'suffer beyond proportion or repair', in the absence of adequate safeguards against misapplication or misuse of such blasphemy laws, the Geneva-based organization says.

The ICJ has also made a number of recommendations to the Pakistani executive, legislative and judicial branches to address the defects in the framing of the blasphemy laws as well as of the shortcomings at the investigative, prosecutorial, procedural, administrative and judicial levels highlighted in the report to minimize the misuse of the blasphemy laws and ensure that those accused of blasphemy have a fair chance at defending themselves.

"It's time Pakistan and other countries got rid of these noxious laws, which continue to stifle freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief, and instead promote extremism and intolerance," Zarifi added.

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## **Why Pakistani Hindus leave their homes for India**

BBC (28.10.2015) - <http://bbc.in/1P7jYV3> - Mala Das can just about write her name. At 16, this has been her greatest achievement. "When I came here I was completely unlettered. Today I can write my name," she says.

But Mala is still unsure about numbers - when asked about the year she came to India, she draws a blank.

Her family and neighbours say they arrived in 2011 from the Pakistani city of Hyderabad in Sindh province to escape "religious and cultural persecution and government apathy".

About 1,200 people, who have migrated from Pakistan in the past five years, are housed in three camps in Delhi and many say one of the biggest problems they faced back home was that they were unable to educate their children.

Bhagwan Das, who was among a group of 71 people who reached Delhi three weeks ago, has two growing children with no formal education. He says they were treated like "second-class citizens" in Pakistan.

"Our children don't feel welcome in schools there. Muslims taunt us for being Hindu. Our girls are also sexually harassed," Mr Das says.

There is a primary school in the migrant camp where children are taught how to read and write.

Rajwanti, 13, and other children in the camp allege that Hindu boys and girls are made to read the Quran (Muslim holy book) in Pakistani schools and that Muslim students laugh at their religious practices.

Mala says she is happy to see that Hindus in India can practice their religion openly. "Here Hindus pray without fear in temples and organise religious festivals outdoor. In Pakistan we prayed at home. If we went to temples, we avoided the gaze of our neighbours."

Ishwar Lal, 18, who came to Delhi five months ago, says he feels liberated in India. "We have full religious freedom here. We are free."

Moreover, he says, in India "everyone is respectful of each other's faith".

Pakistan was created in 1947 after being carved out of India's mainly Muslim areas. A huge exchange of population took place during the partition which was often bloody.

Today, Muslims constitute 14% of India's population, while in Pakistan, Hindus are said to be just over 2%.

There is no official estimate of the number of Pakistani Hindus living in India, but over the years, small groups have been crossing the border to reach Delhi or other northern states, such as Rajasthan and Haryana. Once in India, they apply for asylum and, eventually, citizenship.

Islamabad has repeatedly said its Hindu community is safe and reports of their leaving are exaggerated.

In a written reply to a BBC query, the Indian government has revealed that more than 1,400 Pakistanis have been given citizenship since 2011 and that an overwhelming majority of them are Hindus.

Those living in the Delhi camps, however, say they are yet to get Indian citizenship.

"We applied in 2011 but nothing has happened. The BJP government which claims to have sympathy for us is no different from other governments. We feel frustrated," says Arjun Das, who is regarded as the leader of Pakistani Hindus in Delhi camps.

Pahlaj, who arrived three weeks ago, says he is disappointed that "no Hindu leader or neighbour has visited us yet".

But most say they are happy to be in India where they feel "at home" and Pahlaj says most Pakistani Hindus want to leave their country.

"A small number has come to India. Millions of Pakistani Hindus are waiting for an opportunity to do the same."

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## **Islamic inscriptions on a sword found on Christian cause his arrest under blasphemy charges**

BPCA (15.10.2015) - <http://www.britishpakistanichristians.co.uk/> - A young Christian man was accused of blasphemy and arrested in Sargodha, a city of Punjab under section 295-A, on October 8th 2015. Naveed John (24) has been languishing in prison since his arrest.

Police sources have claimed that a sword inscribed with holy verses from the Quran was found in Naveed's room, however members of his family have alleged that police demanded a bribe for his release, and on their refusal to pay the police accused Naveed of a blasphemy.

Naveed John, a resident of Maryam Colony, Sargodha, was arrested on 8th October by Satellite Town police. Police registered First Investigation Report (FIR) No. 619/15.

This latest arrest is a move away from the usual incident regarding blasphemy in that the accusation was not made by the local community, but from state police. The Police First Incident Report (FIR) states that police found a sword in Naveed's room inscribed with Kalma (Muslim proclamations). It further states that a Christian should not be in possession of the Muslim sword and that knowledge of the sword in a Christian's possession could stir Muslims to violence. The local police arrested him under Section 295a of the Pakistan penal code. The sword has been described as a gift from a friend that Naveed kept simply to show courtesy and avoid offence, he made sure it was kept safe and appropriately on a mattress off the floor to prevent any offence to Muslims.

Naveed John was known to be a very gifted healer and he had prayed for many sick and demon possessed people whom God had healed through him. Many of these people were Muslims who had then secretly converted to Christianity as a consequence of the miraculous healing they experienced. This caused great community tension and the local Muslims kept accusing him of crimes to the local police - who themselves have been harassing him for many months.

Tahir Naveed Chaudhry, attorney for Naveed said:

"Blasphemy laws are used to settle scores and are a mechanism to target Christians, something must be done to change them. Here we find another innocent young man accused of a crime that could cost him his life."

Sakhawat Masih, the elder brother of Naveed told us that some police had arrived at their house a few days before he was arrested and demanded some money for what they referred to as a bribe for safety of the Christian family, not unlike the Islamic Jizya Tax. The police threatened to take action if he denied them. It would seem that they followed through on their promise.

The next hearing of this blasphemy case is scheduled for 17th October and we call on Christians to pray for justice for this poor young man. We are raising an appeal to pay for the legal cover for Naveed John's case and believe the figure will be around £400.

Shamim Masih, BPCA researcher, said:

"This latest blasphemy allegation sets an awful precedent. That police can now enact such cases on a whim after being denied a bribe places Christians in a very dangerous position. A thorough examination of this incident is required and a police review of their own practices - if not I predict many more Christians are going to lose their lives to the draconian blasphemy laws."

Wilson Chowdhry, Chairman of the BPCA, said:

"I hold grave concerns about this most recent blasphemy arrest, state policing authorities are meant to protect the communities they serve, but something has been amiss in Pakistan from the outset of their establishment. Bribery and corruption in Pakistan have demeaned their international status and is well documented regarding their police force. However, this latest act that has no doubt destroyed a young man's life is an alarming precedent, that illustrates the quality of lives for Christians in Pakistan has hit rock-bottom."

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## **Over 1400 cases of blasphemy in a year**

Agenzia Fides (15.10.2015) - [http://www.fides.org/en/news/38670-ASIA\\_PAKISTAN\\_Over\\_1400\\_cases\\_of\\_blasphemy\\_in\\_a\\_year#.ViAXYYfov4g](http://www.fides.org/en/news/38670-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Over_1400_cases_of_blasphemy_in_a_year#.ViAXYYfov4g) - In 2014, 1,400 cases of blasphemy were registered in Pakistan: it is a peak, compared with the trend of recent years, which reveals a very worrying situation. This was reported by senior lawyer Syed Mumtaz Shah, speaking at a seminar on "Human Rights, Religious freedom, Social Inclusion & Political Participation of Minority", organized in Karachi in recent days by the "Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research" (PILER). As Fides learns, the seminar was attended by leaders and representatives of civil society, of different religions. According to data released, about 800 cases have been registered against Muslims, "who should take to the streets against the abuse of this law" said those present.

According to lawyer Nisar Shar, spokesman for the association of lawyers in Karachi, "even for lawyers it has become dangerous to do their job and defend a defendant accused of blasphemy", recalling the case of lawyer Rashid Rehman, who was killed because he had taken the defense of a case.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), an NGO widespread in Pakistan, in 2014 the Pakistani courts sentenced three people to death, six to life imprisonment, and three people to two years' imprisonment for blasphemy.

### ***Arrest of a Christian on alleged blasphemy***

Pakistan Christian Post (15.10.2015) - <http://www.pakistanchristianpost.com/detail.php?hnewsid=5644> - A young Christian man was accused of blasphemy and arrested in Sargodha, a city of Punjab, under section 295-A, on October 8th 2015. Naveed John (24) has been languishing in prison since his arrest.

Police sources have claimed that a sword inscribed with holy verses from the Quran was found in Naveed's room, however members of his family have alleged that police demanded a bribe for his release, and on their refusal to pay the police accused Naveed of a blasphemy.

Naveed John, a resident of Maryam Colony, Sargodha, was arrested on 8th October by Satellite Town police. Police registered First Investigation Report (FIR) No. 619/15.

This latest arrest is a move away from the usual incident regarding blasphemy in that the accusation was not made by the local community, but from state police. The police First Incident Report (FIR) states that they found a sword in Naveed's room inscribed with Kalma (Muslim proclamations). It further states that a Christian should not be in possession of the Muslim sword and that knowledge of the sword in a Christian's possession could stir Muslims to violence. Naveed John was arrested under Section 295a of the Pakistan penal code. The sword has been described as a gift from a friend that Naveed kept simply to show courtesy and avoid offence, he made sure it was kept safe and appropriately on a mattress off the floor to prevent any offence to Muslims.

Naveed was known to be a very gifted healer and he had prayed for many sick and demon possessed people whom God had healed through him. Many of these people were Muslims who had then secretly converted to Christianity as a consequence of the miraculous healing they experienced. This caused great community tension and the local Muslims kept accusing him of crimes to the local police - who themselves have been harassing him for many months.

Tahir Naveed Chaudhry, attorney for Naveed John said: "Blasphemy laws are used to settle scores and are a mechanism to target Christians, something must be done to change them. Here we find another innocent young man accused of a crime that could cost him his life."

Sakhawat Masih, Naveed's elder brother told us that police had arrived at their house a few days before he was arrested and demanded some money for what they referred to as a bribe for safety of the Christian family, not unlike the Islamic Jizya Tax. The police threatened to take action if he denied them. It would seem that they followed through on their promise.

The next hearing of this blasphemy case is scheduled for 17th October and we call on Christians to pray for justice for this poor young man.

Shamim Masih, BPCA researcher, said: "This latest blasphemy allegation sets an awful precedent. That police can now enact such cases on a whim after being denied a bribe places Christians in a very dangerous position. A thorough examination of this incident is required and a police review of their own practices - if not I predict many more Christians are going to lose their lives to the draconian blasphemy laws."

Wilson Chowdhry, Chairman of the BPCA, said: "I hold grave concerns about this most recent blasphemy arrest, state policing authorities are meant to protect the communities they serve, but something has been amiss in Pakistan from the outset of their establishment. Bribery and corruption in Pakistan have demeaned their international status and is well documented regarding their police force. However, this latest act that has no doubt destroyed a young man's life is an alarming precedent that illustrates the quality of lives for Christians in Pakistan has hit rock-bottom."

See more at:

<http://www.pakistanchristianpost.com/detail.php?hnewsid=5644#sthash.qMbVbt41.dpuf>

### ***Blasphemy: bail for a Christian, final hearing for another case***

Agenzia Fides (13.10.2015) - [http://www.fides.org/en/news/38653-ASIA\\_PAKISTAN\\_Blasphemy\\_bail\\_for\\_a\\_Christian\\_final\\_hearing\\_for\\_another\\_case#.ViAXI4fov4g](http://www.fides.org/en/news/38653-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Blasphemy_bail_for_a_Christian_final_hearing_for_another_case#.ViAXI4fov4g) - There is good news for the Christian community in Pakistan: the Christian

Pervaiz Masih, arrested in the district of Kasur on September 2 for alleged blasphemy, was granted bail. This is what the lawyers of the NGO "The Voice" told Fides recalling that "it is one of the rare cases in the history of Pakistan. It is very difficult for a person who is accused of blasphemy, especially an innocent Christian, to be granted bail a month after the arrest by a court of first instance".

Lawyer Aneeqa Maria Anthony, who worked on the case, told Fides: "Many victims of alleged blasphemy are condemned to death such as Asia Bibi and Sawan Masih. Others, as in the case of Pastor Aftab Gill are imprisoned unjustly: we pray for their release". "With regards to Pervaiz Masih's case – he continues – God has blessed us with this very important result: Kasur, in fact, it is one of the most conservative areas in Punjab, and it is very dangerous to contest a blasphemy case in this area". Operators of the NGO "The Voice" were stopped by the police of Kasur in the middle of the night and suffered threats and intimidation by the police. Pervaiz Masih's case will now go ahead.

Another Christian, Imran Masih, who was also accused of blasphemy, has instead been behind bars since 1 July 2009 and in 2010 was sentenced to life imprisonment for blasphemy by a court of first instance. "The accusations against him are totally false and invented. I have decided that I will fight for this case. The final hearing of the appeal process is on October 28, 2015 before the Lahore High Court" says to Fides Khalil Tahir Sindhu, a Catholic lawyer and Minister for Minorities in the government of the province of Punjab. "When I met Imran's sister, she was crying for her brother's life", he notes. Despite the risks to his personal safety, the lawyer will be in court to prove to the judges that Imran Masih is completely innocent.

### ***Christians imprisoned for blasphemy fear an extrajudicial murder***

Agenzia Fides (01.10.2015) - [http://www.fides.org/en/news/38581-ASIA\\_PAKISTAN\\_Christians\\_imprisoned\\_for\\_blasphemy\\_fear\\_an\\_extrajudicial\\_murder#.ViAYIIfov4g](http://www.fides.org/en/news/38581-ASIA_PAKISTAN_Christians_imprisoned_for_blasphemy_fear_an_extrajudicial_murder#.ViAYIIfov4g) - Four Christians accused and arrested for alleged blasphemy are in danger of being killed in an extrajudicial killing. As Fides learns, Protestant Pastor Aftab Gill, Unatan Gill and two other Christians currently detained in the central prison of Punjab, should appear in court on October 16, but the court has refused to provide them an escort. Family members fear that, in the transfer, they can be killed by the radicals.

The four are accused of insulting Islam by publishing, on the occasion of a funeral, some posters in which the word "rasool" (Urdu: Apostle) was used which is an attribute of the Prophet Muhammad (see Fides 20/08/2015). A month ago the court denied the release of the Christians, but granted bail to Muslim printmaker who printed the posters. The NGO CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance and Settlement) says that "the judge was biased because the term 'rasool' is found in the Bible in Urdu and Christians had no blasphemous intention".

Imtiaz Shakir, Muslim lawyer who defends Christians in court, told Fides: "The trial is an exaggeration, one is abusing the word rasool, which in Urdu means messenger. The accusation is preposterous, the whole system is biased, local authorities are looking for an opportunity for another extrajudicial killing". "My religion - Shakir continues - does not allow me to endorse such injustice: these innocent people are suffering because of a misunderstanding of Islam. This is a failure of the judicial system and an abuse of power.

Not only Christians but all Pakistani citizens who believe in the rule of law and justice should speak out to defend these innocent people".

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## **Pakistan's Supreme Court makes landmark judgment**

World Watch Monitor (14.10.215) - <http://bit.ly/1i9s54B> - In a landmark judgment on 7 October the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SCP) upheld the death sentence of Malik Mumtaz Qadri, 30, who murdered the former Governor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, a liberal Muslim, on 4 January, 2011.

Qadri, one of Taseer's official bodyguards from the Elite Force, shot him 27 times with an AK-47 sub-machine gun at Kohsar Market in Pakistan's capital, Islamabad, because of Taseer's views on the country's controversial blasphemy laws.

In its judgment on Qadri's appeal against the decision of the Islamabad High Court (IHC), the apex court also allowed the Federation's appeal seeking the restoration of terrorism charges against the accused.

Liberal Muslims and minority groups welcomed the courageous decision of the Supreme Court's judges, which affirmed democratic values, including the rule of law, and rejected religious fanaticism in the public sphere.

Human rights activists and minorities have been demanding the repeal of blasphemy laws, as these laws have been widely used as a tool against minorities, especially against Christians and Ahmadis.

Former Governor Taseer was murdered for defending an illiterate and poor Pakistani Christian woman, Asia Bibi, who was convicted and received the death sentence under the blasphemy law. Her appeal is still pending in the Supreme Court. Bibi was arrested in June 2009, after allegedly insulting Prophet Muhammad during an argument with her Muslim co-worker. Taseer not only visited her in jail, but sent an appeal to the President, Asif Ali Zardari. Moreover, he publicly called for reforms to the blasphemy laws, which were imposed by military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s.

Qadri's act of violence was unprecedented, as he killed a top political figure in broad daylight for religiously motivated reasons. For many, criticising or challenging blasphemy laws is also an act of blasphemy against Islam, its prophet and the Quran. In their view, this cannot be tolerated, and that person should be killed. Therefore, when the former governor demanded modifications to the law, there were many who quickly declared him a blasphemer who deserved death. After killing Taseer, Qadri, a former police guard and the self-confessed murderer, was revered as a hero by many who felt that he did his religious duty as a true Muslim by killing a blasphemer. He was showered with rose petals by lawyers when he first appeared before the trial court in Islamabad and hailed as a soldier of Islam and the Prophet's policeman. Over the last few years, during crowded public rallies, his supporters have demanded his unconditional freedom. After the recent court's judgment, Islamic parties, including Pakistan Sunni Tehreek and Jamaat-e-Ahle Sunnat Pakistan staged a protest rally in Karachi on 9 October and demanded his immediate release.

During the court's hearings, many of Qadri's supporters tried to reach the Supreme Court to pressurise the judges. However, police arrested many people in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, and over 90 were arrested who tried to enter Islamabad's Red Zone, where the Supreme Court is located.

Qadri's sentence was first awarded by a judge in an anti-terror court in October 2011. The judge subsequently left the country for fear of his safety. Against the trial court's decision, Qadri filed an appeal to the Islamabad High Court (IHC), where on 9 March the court upheld the death sentence under the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) but overturned the terrorism charge from the Anti-Terrorism Act's (ATA) Section 7. Later, Qadri filed an appeal in the country's highest court of law against the verdict of the IHC. The federal

government also challenged the IHC's verdict to remove terrorism charges and the Supreme Court combined both petitions.

Qadri's defense counsel, which included two former High Court justices, tried to portray him as a noble Muslim who was carrying out his religious duty to punish a blasphemer who called blasphemy laws "black laws". Through their arguments, the defense counsel tried to justify a murder in the name of religion and demanded the repeal of their client's death sentence.

A three-member bench of the Supreme Court, headed by Justice Asif Saeed Khosa, mainly focused on whether an individual had the authority to assume the role of a judge, jury and executioner after having accused someone of blasphemy.

Justice Khosa observed that press clippings, which were presented in the court against Taseer by the defense counsel, did not provide sufficient evidence that the former governor committed blasphemy.

Justice Khosa was concerned that people could accuse others of blasphemy to settle personal scores. He mentioned the incident of a Christian couple, Shehzad Masih and Shama Bibi, who were burnt alive by a Muslim mob near Lahore on 4 November last year. They were accused of desecrating a copy of the Quran.

"Will it not instill fear in the society if everybody starts taking the law in their own hands and dealing with sensitive matters such as blasphemy on their own rather than going to the courts?" Justice Khosa asked.

The court said that no individual had the authority to punish a blasphemer and that criticising the blasphemy law did not amount to blasphemy. The apex court upheld the death sentence and said that Qadri should be executed for shooting Taseer.

The court's decision is a landmark judgement in the judicial history of Pakistan because it answered some very sensitive questions without any ambiguity. Until now, the religious forces used religious rhetoric to silence those critical of the blasphemy laws.

Although the court's judgment is a welcome step, now it is the responsibility of the government to take strict actions against those who falsely accuse others under blasphemy laws. It seems unlikely that the present government of Mian Nawaz Sharif will take any measures in this direction, as his party shares the same ideology as religious groups.

Extremists have been operating in the country with impunity because religion is the basis of the country's foundation. Because of that, these people use violence in the name of religion to gain power and intimidate others to accept their religious teachings. Since Taseer's murder, no Pakistani political leader has had the guts to criticise the legislation.

Generally, the courts' credibility is not very high when it comes to sensitive cases related to religion. For that reason, the SC's judgement should be seen as an important step in an Islamic country where liberal Pakistanis are marginalised.

During cases of a religious nature, courtrooms are filled with religious groups who try to pressurise courts to provide judgments in their favour. In an environment where religious intolerance has forged deep roots in Pakistan's conservative society, and courts are careful when they hear cases of a sensitive nature, the present judgment against Qadri, who is a symbol of religious vigilantism, is heroic.

In blasphemy cases, many lawyers are not willing to represent the accused and judges are loath to hear cases for fear of their personal safety. In that atmosphere, the SC's

decision is significant as it gives a signal that the legal system should not be compromised and the principles of justice should be held without any fear and pressure. Similarly, the verdict displays judicial strength against religious fanaticism and supports free speech.

The court reinstated Qadri's conviction under anti-terrorism laws that the Islamabad High Court had wrongly set aside. As a result, Qadri cannot now pay blood money to the victim's family under another Islamic law, the Qisas and Diyat Ordinance, for his release, though his supporters are still publicly offering blood money to Taseer's family.

Because of the fear of violence, it is impossible to initiate a public debate about the misuse of blasphemy laws, as this act is itself considered blasphemy. Therefore, the current observation is significant as it clearly states that criticism of blasphemy law does not constitute blasphemy. It will encourage debate.

According to a Muslim political analyst, Wajahat Masood, hanging Qadri would send a very strong message to supporters of extremism. However, the government will still be under a lot of pressure not to execute Qadri, as he has a strong lobby behind him.

After the Supreme Court's judgment, Qadri can ask the president for a pardon. However, Qadri's lawyers say they will go for a judicial review.

"The SC's verdict and observations of Justice Asif Saeed Khosa during the hearing are epochal not because they lay down new law but because they help wrestle back public space to discuss our flawed blasphemy laws over which our bigoted brigade has established complete dominion," wrote Babar Sattar, a lawyer, in his column in The News on 10 October.

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## **Pakistanis' 'blasphemy' of calling late pastor a Christian 'prophet'**

World Watch Monitor (27.08.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1PK4Bkx> - Pakistani police have charged 15 Christians with blasphemy in the religiously conservative city of Gujrat for publishing a flyer that described a Christian pastor, who died 20 years ago, as one "who was given the title of an apostle".

(The word 'apostle' is translated in the Urdu Bible as 'rasool'. Although the title 'prophet' is usually translated into Urdu by the Arabic-root 'nabi', 'rasool' can also carry the same meaning.)

The claim of "apostleship" or "prophet-hood" is perceived as an open insult and challenge to the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. Muslims believe he is Allah's last and final apostle and prophet, after whom prophecy ceased. Therefore any countering claim is considered blasphemous and, according to Pakistan's blasphemy law, may be punishable with death.

The Catholic news agency, Fides, reported that during the recent Ramadan, in early July, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif approved a summary prohibiting the English translation of Islamic terms. Sacred Arabic names and words like 'Allah', 'masjid', 'sala'at' and 'rasool', it reported, "are now forbidden to be translated into English as 'God', 'mosque', 'prayer' and 'prophet'... The Prime Minister's announcement came a day before the anniversary of the coup of General Zia ul Haq in 1977, when a number of laws were issued to Islamize the country".

In Gujrat, which is in the Punjab region, the flyer, an invitation to Christians to participate in a memorial ceremony on 16 August to commemorate the late Pastor Fazal

Masih, carried pictures of 15 office-bearers of the "Biblical Church of God", a small, little-known Protestant group working in Gujrat city.

A Pakistani commentator explained to World Watch Monitor: "The flyer's language looks like it's been copied from the Internet. It's language that may be more acceptable in countries where Christianity has more freedom. It suggests that the late pastor practised the gifts of the Holy Spirit and had a prophetic gift. However this is a concept that does not translate easily in an Islamic context."

The flyers were placed across the city in the areas where Christians are in a higher number, such as Mughal Colony, where the dead man's son, Younatan Fazal Gill, lived. He was one of the organizers of the program.

"There are about 200 households of Christians who have reasonable means of earning, and also have their own houses," Mukhtar Mughal Khan, a Christian political leader who and former local councillor, told World Watch Monitor.

"Only three days before the announced date of the program, first a Muslim woman and then Umar Butt, a shopkeeper, noticed that the flyer used the word 'apostle' for a Christian.

"There are people who say Umar Butt enquired of Younatan's brother-in-law, Imran Masih, about the title of 'apostle'. Imran told him that Christians could use this "Biblical" description, after which the situation escalated.

"On 15 August, it was announced from the loudspeaker of a local mosque that all Muslims should gather to discuss this issue. The police of the Civil Lines were also called in.

"After the meeting, the police searched Christian neighbourhoods and removed all the flyers. And when the organizers of the program were preparing to gather the next day, the police arrested some of them."

The police of Civil Lines registered a case (numbered 972/15) under the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2001. This was an unusual move because it did not allow for a local citizen to lodge the application, nor was the case registered under the blasphemy laws of Pakistan.

"The situation got tense, even though there was no untoward incident, so Christians started to leave the area," said Khan.

A Christian health visitor, Roseanna Masih, told World Watch Monitor that two women living across the street from her started name-calling: "They said Christians had blasphemed the Holy Prophet and that they should be punished for it. I told them that anyone who had done wrong should be punished, but why should all of us be treated with contempt?"

"On Friday, 21 August, Christians were expecting that after Friday prayers extremist Muslims would attack their houses, so almost all their women and children were sent away while only men were left their to guard their houses," said Khan. He said that there were about 500 houses in the Mughal Colony and about 200 households were of Christians.

"The police cordoned off the area and the Deputy Police Officer, Ghulam Mustafa, and Civil Lines Police Station House Officer, Shahid Tanveer, played a wonderful role and did not let any unpleasant incident take place," said Khan.

Police Officer Tanveer later told World Watch Monitor that the situation was under control and that there was no law and order situation in the area.

"However, the police arrested Pastor Aftab Gill, another son of the deceased pastor, and three others, while Younatan has obtained bail," said Khan.

### **Similar cases**

This is not the first time a Christian has been accused of blasphemy because of Biblical interpretation or translation. Almost exactly a year ago, on 23 Aug 23 in Bahawalpur, about 450 kilometres from Lahore, 60-year-old Naja Masih was sitting outside his home with his neighbour, Shahid Mehmood, discussing similarities between the Bible and the Qur'an, after which Masih was charged and immediately handed to the police.

In his First Information Report (FIR), submitted in the Civil Lines Police Station, Mehmood stated that Masih told him "God himself took human form – God forbid – and appeared to Lot, and told him to leave his village". Mehmood further alleged that Masih had injured his religious feelings, by saying that when Lot had fled Sodom along with his daughters, his daughters "intoxicated" him and slept with him to continue their father's lineage.

In another case, a Christian man named Anwar Kenneth was arrested and charged under the blasphemy law. He claimed he was one of the two promised witnesses to Jesus (interpreted as Elijah and Moses) in the last book of the Bible (Revelation Chapter 11) but was believed to be mentally ill. However, he was sentenced to death in 2002 and since then his appeal has not been heard by the Supreme Court.

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## **Pakistani Christian flood victims forced to renounce Jesus Christ, become slaves to Muslims or die**

The Christian Post (26.08.2015) - <http://wwrn.org/articles/44919/> - As torrential flooding spanned across various regions of Pakistan this summer and washed away thousands of homes, Christians in Kasur have received very little humanitarian aid and have been left to starve if they don't convert to Islam or become modern-day slaves in order to receive help from Muslims or the government.

Wilson Chowdhry, the president of the British Pakistani Christian Association, told The Christian Post that there are more than 60 Christian families in the western Pakistani region of Kasur that have lost their homes and all worldly possessions when the deluge hit this summer and washed their mud homes and everything inside them away.

While Muslims in the region have benefited from temporary shelter, clean water and food provided by Pakistani government agencies and Muslim charities, Christians have largely been without those bare necessities and medication needed to fight illnesses that can occur after flooding.

Chowdhry explained that some Muslim charities are giving Christians the option to convert to Islam and renounce Jesus if they want to receive help.

"We are aware that this community has previously been offered aid from Muslim charities if they convert but they never accept conversion. They hold strong to their faith. They believe God will be their provider," Chowdhry explained. "These families have literally been struggling without food. Churches have opened up their doors but can't provide them much aid because the churches themselves in the region are struggling. We are talking about a very rural part of Pakistan."

Chowdhry added that as desperation started to get the best of the Christian population in Kasur, many Kasur Christians ended up signing bonded labor contracts in order to receive aid from Muslim landlords before BPCA arrived in the region.

"We have come in very late. We first went to Layyah and Gilgit, but if we could have arrived [in Kasur] seven days earlier, there could have been more lives that we potentially could have saved from this modern-day slavery," Chowdhry said. "Several families have already now signed contracts, which has now made them slaves for their Muslim landlords."

Although the flooding hit other regions like Layyah and Gilgit, Chowdhry stated that through "the grace of God," Christians in those areas were "unaffected" by the flooding. After BPCA officer Naveed Aziz visited Christians in Layyah and Gilgit, he then made his way to Kasur where he noticed that Christians in that region were not as fortunate.

"I was shocked at the immense devastation before me it was a lot to take in," Aziz said in a statement. "People are in real desperation and children are starving. I am surprised and shocked at the lack of help from Pakistani authorities."

As flooding has become a consistent problem for Pakistan over the last five years, Chowdhry said it "is not unusual" for the government to overlook helping the Christian communities.

"When it comes to flooding of Christian communities, the government seems to back away. Whereas with Muslim communities, they go straight in there, so do the Muslim charities," Chowdhry said. "Muslim charities depend upon their Muslim supporters for their donations to continue. So, helping Muslims helps support their particular group and the publicity that it generates for them."

The BPCA will aid 60 Christian families from two different Christian communities in Kasur. BPCA will provide basic food items like rice, flour and curry to help prevent those communities from starving. Additionally, the BPCA will provide medication for Dengue fever.

"I'm sure there is more, but these are the 60 families that we are going to be able to help. Anything larger scale than that, we are going to need to have a lot more resources," Chowdhry asserted. "They will literally be eating bread for the duration of the time that we are helping. That's what we can provide. It is a very basic but healthy enough to help them continue in the sustenance they need."

With donations from an unnamed African church, BPCA also plans to build three water pumps in the region to help get those communities access to fresh drinking water.

BPCA would love to provide more for the distressed community in Kasur, but only has enough funds to provide what little the organization can. BPCA started a fundraising effort to help Christian flood victims, however, the effort has only raised the equivalent of \$392.

"To be honest with you, Christians and their lack of support, its very frustrating," Chowdhry admitted. "We do what little we can with the donations that are coming through. We are giving very basic meals at the moment. Luckily, we have the funding for the pumps from another group. People really need to dig down."

"In Matthew 25:40, which goes something like the King will say, 'When you have done it for the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you are doing it me,'" Chowdhry recited. "People need to kind of reflect on that, as Christians we need to help the needy."

Chowdhry is also calling on the Pakistani government to stop ignoring the Christian community and put in place infrastructure that will help limit damage caused by flooding.

"Our dams are outdated. There needs to be more dams restored. They need to be larger-size dams, those that would work more efficiently," Chowdhry argued. "In tandem with this, there has to be a more coordinated approach toward the damn infrastructure with India."

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## **Faisalabad: Christian family forced to flee from place to place after wife converts from Islam**

***Khurram Naveed, 33, a Christian man, and Sobia, 25, a Muslim woman, taught at the same school. Aided by Khurram, Sobia discovered Christianity and decided to be baptised. Since they got married and had two daughters, her parents, Muslim neighbours and imams have tried to convert them to Islam or face the consequences. The two are hoping to emigrate abroad.***

AsiaNews (26.08.2015) – <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Faisalabad:-Christian-family-forced-to-flee-from-place-to-place-after-wife-converts-from-Islam-35131.html> - Khurram Naveed and his family have been on the run since he married a Muslim woman who converted to Christianity.

"Since we got married we have had to change places many times," he explained. "Wherever we go, people ask about my beloved wife's conversion. Sometimes, imams try to force us to convert to Islam, issuing terrible threats."

"My wife, I and our children have had to flee from place to place. We feel threatened as soon as people find out about by wife's Muslim past. However, running from one place to another is not easy. There are so many problems."

"Until now I have to change job six times," he noted, "and finding new employment is not easy. But we need security for our life and we ask for help from the people of God."

Their odyssey began when Khurram Naveed, a 33-year-old Christian man, and Sobia, 25, daughter of Muhammad Riaz, a resident of Jameel Park in Faisalabad, started to teach at 'The Light Christian Primary School in 2009.

Since it was Christian schools, students and staff could take Bible courses. Sobia joined some Christians in one such courses and eventually was drawn to the Gospels and their teachings. She began reading the Bible and decided to embrace the Christian faith.

In order to share her impressions about Christianity and get some help to move towards it, Sobia asked for the help of another teacher, Khurram Naveed, who talked to a clergyman about the situation.

After several discussions with Sobia, and seeing that she was fully consenting in her belief, the pastor decided to baptise her when she reached the age of maturity at 21. Baptised on 9 January 2010, she took a new, Christian name, Mariam (Mary).

After conversion, she wanted to marry the young Christian man. On 20 April 2010, Khurram Naveed and Mariam eloped under Articles 32 and 54, section 9, of the Christian Marriage Act.

However, after their marriage, they could no longer live in Jameel Park. So, the couple fled to Farooqabad, a suburb of Faisalabad, where they were able to start their married life.

All went well for three years, until Mariam's parents found their address in April 2015. The family did not go after them directly, but stirred the couple's Muslim neighbours. They began to say that Mariam was Muslim, who had been kidnapped and converted by Khurram Naveed.

Neighbours continued to challenge the couple's religion until some imam ordered them to convert to Islam or suffer the consequences.

After a few days, the Christian couple had to flee to another secret place, but Mariam's parents found them again. And so they had to flee again, to another city, because they felt unsafe whenever people found out about their past. At present, they are hiding out at a secret place, along with their two daughters, Ramia, 4, and Eman, 2.

"Although the school was doing well and was highly respected, it was impossible to keep it open in the city after Sobia's conversion," said Rev Mukhtar Fazal, owner of 'The Light Christian Primary School'. "I had to sell the building at half of its market value. My business was ruined even though I was not directly involved in the affair."

"I pray for this Christian couple that they might find some quiet in our society. However, I hope that some Christians in the world might help them find some peace of mind. For me the only way out is for them to move to another country."

Mariam spoke to AsiaNews about the difficulties of being Christian in Pakistan. "I became a Christian more than five years ago, but I still do not have my Christian identity card, as well as other papers," she explained.

"If I go to some government office and ask for papers marked with my new faith, I could be threatened for converting to Christianity. Still, having the papers is crucial. Without them, we cannot enrol our daughters in school."

"Since I am still registered as a Muslim, we are open to threats. I really hope someone will help us because it is now impossible to lead a free life. In any event, despite all these problems, we remain firm in our faith following the teaching of the Lord Jesus until the last breath," she said. "I accepted Him in my heart and shall not go back."

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## **Christians' faces painted black and heads shaved following blasphemy allegations**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## **Tempers high in Sindh after two allegations of blasphemy**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Morning Star News (17.06.2015) <http://morningstarnews.org/2015/06/blasphemy-law-reform-drafted-in-pakistan-as-three-more-christians-are-accused/> - The Pakistani government has finished drafting a bill to combat abuse of blasphemy laws to which three Christians in the past month alone have fallen prey, sources said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Reform**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Agenzia Fides (09.06.2015) - 22 Muslims arrested and more than 700 under investigation for the mass attack against the Christian area of Sandha, in Lahore, which occurred on May 24 following accusations of alleged blasphemy committed by the Christian Humayun Faisal. This is what local Christian lawyers told Fides. Faisal, mentally

disabled, had been accused of burning pages of the Koran. The crowd tried to lynch him but the police arrested him, and saved him. The anger of the protesters turned then to the houses of the neighborhood where the man lived, and only a quick police intervention avoided a "collective punishment" that could have become a massacre.

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

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

"Two other Muslim leaders distinguished themselves for their intervention in favor of Christians" says to Fides Dominican Fr. James Channan, Director of the "Peace Center" in Lahore. "The imam of the mosque in Lahore, Abdul Khabir Azad, having learned of the unrest, went immediately on the spot and stayed there until three in the morning, parleying with local Muslim leaders to stop any form of violence. Even Alama Tahir Ashrafi, chairman of the Pakistan Ulema Council, arrived at the scene to mediate. The two condemned any retaliation on innocent Christians, helping to restore calm. They acted for justice, giving a good example", said Fr.Channan: "When a Christian is only accused of alleged blasphemy (to be proved) there are people who incite to violence and a whole community is responsible. This is an incredible and unacceptable fact for the rule of law".

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

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## **Ahmedis in a Chakwal village fear for their lives**

By Nabeel Anwar Dhakku

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

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

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

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

According to law, a worship place of Ahmedis cannot have minarets or domes as it makes it resemble a mosque. The demolition was welcomed by religious leaders of the area from Deobandi and Bareilvi sects alike and for days, local newspapers ran statements from religious leaders who hailed it as a positive step. This has intensified hatred against the Ahmedis in the village.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## **Pakistan's Christians faithful and resilient in face of persecution**

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

Last month, two bomb blasts in a Christian neighbourhood of the Pakistani city of Lahore killed 17 people and wounded more than 70 as worshipers attended Sunday Mass at St. John's Roman Catholic Church and Christ Church, a Church of Pakistan church and a member of the Anglican Communion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Bail dismissed: Al-Fazl manager sent behind bars

***Tahir Mehdi Imtiaz Warraich, the manager of daily Al-Fazl, a 102-year-old Ahmadiyya publication, was sent to jail after a judicial magistrate dismissed his bail application on Wednesday.***

TPA (14.04.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1LaZWTv> - Millat Park police had recently arrested him near an anti-terrorism court after he had appeared before the court in connection with his bail application in a different blasphemy case lodged two years ago. Warraich was on his way home after securing interim bail when he was arrested by police near the court following a tip-off by an anti-Ahmadiyya group active in the city. Police made the arrest in connection with an FIR registered on April 16, 2014 under Sections 295-A and 298-C of the Pakistan Penal Code.

Hafiz Nasir, the complainant in the case, had said that he had purchased a burger from a joint owned by Imran Nasir and Adnan Nasir. He said he had found copies of Ahmadiyya monthly Ansarullah among other publications in the shopper bag containing the burger. Nasir said editor Ahmad Tahir Mirza, composer Farhan Ahmed, publisher Abdul Manan Kausar and printer Warraich had outraged his religious feelings by printing and circulating the magazine in a bid to propagate Ahmadiyyat.

He said he had called Rescue 15 after returning to the spot. Nasir said dozens of people had congregated there following the arrival of a police team. He said the suspects had fled in the ensuing pandemonium. An FIR was registered against six suspects on this account.

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## Muslim leaders condemn Lahore church attacks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif condemned the blasts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## **Pakistan rally celebrates Charlie Hebdo attackers**

AFP (13.01.2015) [http://articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/2015-01-13/news/58024547\\_1\\_blasphemy-pakistan-two-brothers](http://articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/2015-01-13/news/58024547_1_blasphemy-pakistan-two-brothers) - While last week's attack on French satirical magazine [Charlie Hebdo](#) sparked global outrage, dozens of people in Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar paid tribute Tuesday to the brothers who carried out the murders.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## **PM's ambitious action plan and minorities**

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

After the deadly Taliban attack on the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar, Prime Minister (PM) Nawaz Sharif has announced an ambitious 20-point plan of action to eradicate extremism and terrorism from the country. It seems that eradicating extremism and terrorism from the country has become a top priority of the government but, unfortunately, the leaders of religious parties and madrassas (seminaries) are already expressing their reservations. The media and some analysts are also expressing their suspicions, saying that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. I think this is because of the government's history of making big and tall claims but following them up with no action.

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

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

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

The PML-N should not forget the role of the Christian leadership in Punjab. The province was achieved because of the Christian leadership's support but, unfortunately, now they

are fleeing the country to save their lives. They have realised that their honour, worship places and their properties will not be protected. It is a great challenge for the Muslim League government, as the founder of Pakistan and the then head of the Muslim League had ensured equal citizenship rights to minorities. However, after the Quaid's death, no Muslim League government could keep his promises to the minorities. I am sorry that even after 67 years we have failed to consider minorities as equal citizens of the country. Instead, efforts are being made to expel them from Pakistan, the land their forefathers struggled for.

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

Last year, the ex-Chief Justice of Pakistan, Justice Tassaduq Husain Jilani, ordered the constitution of a Council for Minorities' Rights (CMR) but, unfortunately, it is still pending. In November, the Supreme Court (SC) of Pakistan resumed a hearing related to the implementation of the SC's order of June 19, 2014 about a national council for minorities. Its function will be to monitor the practical realisation of the rights of and safeguards for minorities under the constitution and law. The council will also be mandated to frame policy recommendations for safeguarding and protecting minorities' rights by the provincial and federal governments. We heard some time ago that a consensus had been reached between the government and opposition but still there is nothing. Also, I have doubts about whether minority groups have been consulted over this matter.

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

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

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

The recognition of minorities' suffering is great, but just adding a point will not be enough. This is the time to take action to ensure security for the minorities. Recognising

their services and role in the making of Pakistan would be a good start and this can be achieved by simply adding a chapter to school and college books. Legislation to ensure security and protection to minorities is also necessary, otherwise the PM's action plan will never be accomplished.

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