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Pakistani court sentences Christian to death

ACLJ (27.12.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2sgcqIs> - A trial court in Pakistan has sentenced two Christian brothers to death for blasphemy.

In the recent months, the Organization for Legal Aid (OLA), the Pakistani office of our international affiliate, the European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ), has worked diligently to defend Amoon Ayub, one of the two Christian brothers, accused of posting offensive material against Islam on the Internet. Qaiser Ayub, the other brother, is represented by the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS) in Pakistan.

Our client, Amoon, was falsely accused of helping set up a website containing blasphemous material after a fight broke out between our client's brother (the co-defendant in this case) and his Muslim friends over one of the friend's sister. Amoon believes that his brother's Muslim friends, Zaryab Sheikh and Sheraz Qureshi, created the website using his brother's and his name, address, and phone numbers on the website in retaliation.

During the trial, OLA provided evidence and Amoon's testimony, completely exonerating Amoon. It was further proven that there was no evidence to tie Amoon to the alleged blasphemous material, as the forensics report did not contain any evidence showing that Amoon's computer, internet, IP address, or phone line were used in any posting to the website.

Much to our disappointment, on December 13, 2018, Judge Javed Iqbal Bosal declared the Ayub brothers guilty and sentenced them to death for the crime of blasphemy

This judgment stands in complete opposition to the Pakistani Supreme Court's recent acquittal of Asia Bibi and its powerful statement condemning these types of false accusations. Furthermore, the judgment also seems to ignore the Pakistani government's reinforcement of the Supreme Court's ruling as it has arrested hundreds of extremists who violently rioted after the ruling and charged the leaders who instigated the mobs under the anti-terrorism and treason laws.

Unfortunately, here – just like in the case of Asia Bibi – Christians are often falsely accused under Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

The OLA is preparing Amoon's appeal to be filed in the High Court and we hope that the High Court will follow the Supreme Court and the government in rejecting and denouncing these false accusations. We will continue to keep you updated on any progress with the case and hope that justice will prevail and Amoon will be acquitted.

Pakistan arrests 1100 supporters of detained cleric

By Asim Tanveer

AP News (24.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2r8Ept2> - Police in an ongoing crackdown arrested some 1100 supporters of a detained radical Islamic cleric, who disrupted daily life with nationwide rallies following the acquittal of a Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy, officials said Saturday.

Senior police officer Tahir Mahmood said that supporters of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik party were picked up in sweeps across the country, mainly in Punjab province, following the arrest of its leader, Khadim Hussain Rizvi. Mahmood said police teams raided Labbaik party seminaries, the homes of party leaders and supporters and hiding places to net them.

He said police also arrested scores of Rizvi's supporters as they took to streets to protest his overnight arrest. He said most of the arrested men were sent to prison for one month. He added that those charged with violence and arson in their protests over Asia Bibi's acquittal would be dealt with according to relevant laws.

Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry said the current crackdown on Labbaik party supporters has nothing to do with Asia Bibi's case. He said the arrests are being made to contain those exploiting the situation in the name of religion to gain political strength.

Rizvi's supporters held violent rallies against the Supreme Court's Oct. 31 acquittal of Bibi. Rizvi has called for more protests on Sunday in the capital, Islamabad. Pre-empting the possible protest, police in the capital have set up security posts near a vital intersection that connects the capital with the garrison city of Rawalpindi. Rizvi and his supporters earlier this year blocked that intersection for 20 days protesting the change of a religious reference in a parliamentary document. That protest led to the resignation of the law minister of previous government.

Pakistan's hard-line Islamists have threatened to kill anyone who insults Islam or speaks out against the country's blasphemy laws.

Associated Press writer Zarar Khan in Islamabad contributed to this report.

The lessons of the Asia Bibi case

Pakistan has released the purported blasphemer against Islam. Now what nation will have the courage to grant her asylum?

By Nina Shea

National Review (16.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2A0wodU> - Asia Bibi, the Catholic mother imprisoned in Pakistan for nine years and condemned to hang for violating that country's strict blasphemy law, has drawn broad sympathy throughout the West. Lacking credible evidence, and despite her denials, lower courts plainly yielded to Islamist pressure in making the illiterate field hand the first Pakistani woman to be given a death sentence for insulting Islam's prophet, Mohammed. Then on October 31, Bibi finally received justice in an acquittal by Pakistan's supreme court. But when she was released a week later, she found that mobs were baying for her blood throughout Pakistan — and, most surprisingly, that the West held out no firm offer of a safe haven.

Islamabad has given assurances that Bibi has been taken to a secret, secure location inside Pakistan, pending a permanent place of refuge. But her escape seems stalled. The West's response so far of passive hand-wringing while Bibi faces mortal danger indicates more than poor planning; it shows a failure to fully comprehend the deeply radicalizing effects of the blasphemy taboo within the world's second-largest Muslim nation — and the inroads it has made in the West.

Western leaders have consistently expressed concern for Bibi during her nearly decade-long ordeal. Human-rights advocates, such as the indefatigable Lord David Alton, who just last month met personally in Pakistan with the chief justice, have vigorously championed Bibi in the British parliament. Yet when the moment of truth arrived, London quickly decided it would not give her asylum owing to security concerns. The U.K. has its own radical Islamist leaders within its million-strong Pakistani community to worry about, including Anjem Choudary, paroled last month following a terror-law conviction. Lord Alton called the British decision “craven.”

In Paris, the city hall had an enlarged photo of Bibi by its front entrance when I last visited several years ago, and France has long been discussed as a place of asylum for her. But deadly Islamist attacks against Charlie Hebdo’s editors for blasphemy, and most recently against French Jews, make asylum there unthinkable. Last week Italy and Canada revealed their engagement in “sensitive” multilateral talks on Bibi’s case, but so far neither has offered an actual legal grant of asylum. Also last week, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized for Canada’s turning away the MS St. Louis and its 907 desperate Jewish passengers seeking refuge from German Nazis 79 years ago. Hopefully, he will apply the St. Louis lesson to throw a lifeline to Bibi.

A recent appeal on Bibi’s behalf by 190 European parliamentarians demands her safe passage from Pakistan but says nothing specific about where she can go next. The European countries most welcoming to refugees — the Scandinavian states, Germany, the Netherlands — all have a recent history of Islamist rioting and murder over perceived blasphemy against Islam: by irreverent cartoons, Theo van Gogh and Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s film on the treatment of women, a papal speech at Regensburg University, etc. Providing indefinite, round-the-clock security to a marked person such as Bibi would be costly, as the U.K. learned with Salman Rushdie. And Amsterdam has already had to withdraw much of its embassy staff from Pakistan this week following threats received after the nation granted asylum to Bibi’s lawyer and the Dutch politician Geert Wilders mocked the Muslim prophet on Twitter.

In a landmark blasphemy case in October, the European Court for Human Rights upheld an Austrian court’s conviction of a political activist on charges similar to Bibi’s, albeit they don’t carry the death penalty. For the sake of keeping social peace, Europe’s highest civil-rights court validated that country’s interest in criminalizing speech that “defames” the prophet Mohammed and in establishing a right to have “religious feelings protected.” The Austrian defendant had criticized the prophet as a “pedophile” for marrying a six-year-old; Bibi’s alleged insult is not disclosed, since repeating it would be deemed another act of blasphemy in Pakistan.

In truth, the anti-blasphemy movement went international several decades ago. After Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa in 1989 against anyone connected with Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*, several of its editors, translators, and sellers were either attacked or murdered in Japan, the United States, Norway, and Turkey. The Saudi-based Organization of

Islamic Cooperation leveraged the 2005 Danish cartoon crisis to get Europe to police speech to protect Islam. Since then, the EU has adopted hate-speech bans on anything deemed Islamophobic by anyone. (Charges in the Austria case were brought by a secular magazine, not Muslims.)

Europe is trying to placate the Islamists by giving in on the blasphemy issue, but Bibi's experience is a case study on how legitimizing religious speech taboos only fans the flames.

Bibi was arrested in 2009 after she triggered a dispute with Muslim women when she, an "infidel," took a sip of water from a communal cup while harvesting a hot field. The Muslim women accused Bibi of blaspheming their prophet during the course of this heated exchange. At trial, the Muslim berry pickers gave conflicting testimony and were manipulated by a local imam — facts that were overlooked by the trial court and Bibi's devastatingly inexperienced trial attorney but would be determinative for the supreme court. In 2010, Bibi was convicted and sentenced under section 295-C of the 1986 blasphemy law. For her own protection, she was confined in an isolation cell, where she cooked her own food to avoid poisoning.

With the blasphemy law already infamous as an oppressive tool for settling personal scores against Christians and other minorities, Asia Bibi attracted the sympathy of Punjab's governor, Salman Taseer, and Pakistan's minorities minister, Shahbaz Bhatti. Both were assassinated in 2011. The murder of Bhatti, a Christian, occurred with impunity, while Mumtaz Qadri, the killer of the Muslim governor, was arrested, tried, and sentenced to death, whereupon he became lionized as a martyr for the faith.

Qadri's fans include a large part of the Pakistani lawyers' association, whose members, in their trademark black suits, showered rose petals on him as he entered the courthouse. They volunteered by the hundred to defend him pro bono. In 2008, this same lawyers' association was enthusiastically cited by the New York Times as a hopeful sign for upholding Pakistan's liberal tradition," and as "perhaps the most consequential outpouring of liberal, democratic energy in the Islamic world in recent years." But as lawyers rallied around the blasphemy issue, it became deeply illiberal. Saiful Mulook, one of the last of the true liberals, who represented Bibi in her appeal, had to flee for his life last week and go to the Netherlands.

Another figure inspired by Qadri is hardline cleric Khadim Rizvi, who organized Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP), a burgeoning political party centered on fighting blasphemy against Islam. Last week TLP incited massive protests against Bibi in Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi, paralyzing key transportation routes. To restore order, the government blocked cellphone service and social media throughout the country for three days. Prime Minister Imran Khan also reportedly gave Rizvi a chance to appeal the supreme court's decision to release Bibi and promised to block her from leaving the country. Meanwhile, Rizvi has been calling for the murder of the judges, It's not clear what the prime minister will do if Bibi gets an actual visa and promise of asylum from the United States, for example. So far he hasn't had to cross that bridge.

Bibi's husband, Ashiq Massih, told me two and a half years ago, after a conference — held in New York and sponsored by the Holy See — on persecution that Pakistan's supreme court wanted to release his wife but, concerned about anti-blasphemy rioting, was waiting “until things cooled down.” The court, tired of waiting, finally released Bibi last week, and Pakistan's ensuing descent into radicalism, wholly separate from the Taliban, has been on full display. Asia Bibi is the litmus test of whether the United States and the rest of the West are really willing to defend persecuted religious minorities around the world.

Nina Shea

Director, Center for Religious Freedom

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Promoting American leadership and global engagement for a secure, free, and prosperous future.

Asia Bibi's release day has finally come! Now what?



BPCA (08.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2Ovhq4N> - Asia Bibi has been set free from her long-term home under captivity at Multan Jail and we confirmed this with media after news from her family. BPCA will not give any more details to media groups until given the express permission of the family.

Wilson Chowdhry has spoken with the family of Asia Bibi, at 6am UK time on 8th November and they expressed that it is of utmost importance that there be no further speculation on her whereabouts reported by either concerned groups or international media. Asia Bibi, her family and guardians all still face a real and present danger of being killed.

This article is to celebrate the release of Asia Bibi and though general steps brought forth by human rights activists any reports or comments therein about her possible location are not endorsed by BPCA.

Asia Bibi has now seen the light of day after ten years of incarceration, eight of which were on death row after she was falsely accused of blasphemy. The allegation arose after she drank water from a well used by Muslims and offered some to her coworkers who believed she had ritually defiled the well as they considered Christians unclean. Those convicted under Pakistan's blasphemy laws are subject to harsh penalties such as life imprisonment and the death penalty.

Read the full article at <https://bit.ly/2Ovhq4N>

'No grounds for review of Supreme Court ruling' – Asia Bibi's lawyer, who fled Pakistan

World Watch Monitor (05.11.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2Oped6U> - The lawyer who defended the Pakistani Christian woman Asia Bibi* against blasphemy charges and secured her acquittal at the Supreme Court says he does not expect a review of her case to take place. As part of its agreement with an Islamist political party to stop its violent protests, the government is reported to have promised that it would not seek to stop the judicial process.

"There is no new ground available to challenge the decision," Saif ul-Malook told World Watch Monitor by telephone today.

Malook, 60, who fled Pakistan on Saturday for fear of his life, added that he would "definitely come back" to defend Asia Bibi if the review was allowed, but said "I expect the review petition will not be allowed because it will be declared infructuous" (a legal term meaning "unfruitful", or un-necessary).

He also added that the Pakistan military would need to provide him with security; as he told AFP: "I need to stay alive to fight her legal case."

Aasiya Noreen, commonly known as Asia Bibi, a Christian mother-of-five, received the death penalty in 2010 after she was allegedly found to have made derogatory comments about Islam's prophet, Muhammad, during an argument with a Muslim woman.

Following her acquittal last week, based on a lack of compelling evidence, a petition for a judicial review of the decision was filed by the initial complainant against her in 2009, the local village imam.

He had also earlier threatened that, if the law failed to condemn her to death, he would call on ordinary Muslims to carry out her execution instead.

Hard-line religious groups responded to the acquittal with mass protests, blockades and threats that paralysed the country.

On Friday night the government reportedly reached an agreement with the Islamist political party Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), with a review of the decision part of the deal, alongside the promise that Noreen cannot leave the country while the judicial review is pending.

Asia Bibi's security 'beefed up'

After the deal was signed, TLP representative Pir Mohammad Afzal Qadri said a plane that should have taken Noreen to a Western country had left without her. The TLP had previously complained that "Western forces are trying to get Asia Bibi out of the country but she should be hanged".

Pakistan's Information Minister Fawad Chaudry told the BBC that Noreen's security had been "beefed up".

"Yes, there is a situation and we are dealing with it, but I assure you that her life is not in danger," he said.

Noreen's husband, Ashiq Masih, through his family's spokesman Joseph Nadeem, has requested asylum with the UK, US and Canada.

He told German newspaper Deutsche Welle that the agreement between the government and the TLP had "sent shivers down my spine. My family is frightened, my relatives are frightened and my friends are also frightened ... The current situation is very dangerous for us. We have no security and are hiding here and there, frequently changing our location." He also said his wife would have to stay in jail until any review had taken place.

Any review would be presided over by a whole new Supreme Court panel, without the three judges who ruled on Noreen's case, TLP leaders said on Friday.

One of those three judges, Justice Asif Khosa, was also involved in upholding the death sentence of Mumtaz Qadri, the bodyguard who killed Governor Salmaan Taseer in the capital in 2011. Taseer was shot by Qadri for his support of Noreen.

After news broke that the Chief Justice Saqib Nisar was taken to hospital with heart problems on Sunday, Malook saluted him and his two colleagues at the Supreme Court for the "milestone ruling" that he said had helped to "uphold the supremacy of the rule of law". Reports said that Nisar had been shocked at how fatwas had been pronounced against him in such a blatant way, especially when the 56-page ruling had made it clear how much the three judges had based their decision on guidance from the Quran and hadith.

Nisar had promised back in April that he would hear Asia Bibi's "soon", despite the fact that, for his own personal safety, he could have simply let it wait beyond his own retirement, due in January 2019.

Calm restored

A local source told World Watch Monitor today that after the tumult of last week, a semblance of calm has returned to Pakistan. Schools have re-opened, while churches met – without incident – yesterday, albeit with increased security.

Police have arrested over 100 people who were involved in damaging property during the protests.

Pakistan's Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry told Al Jazeera the government "had been able to defuse the tension and the protests without hurting anyone, and that's a success".

"Extremism is a reality and previous governments have not done enough [on this]. Now this government will start a process ... to take this issue seriously and we have to bring certain reforms in education and elsewhere," he added.

Prime Minister Imran Khan had earlier urged the nation not to let extremists take the law into their own hands.

But the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said the government giving in to TLP's demands was "a mockery of the rule of law".

Meanwhile, the prime minister's ex-wife, Jemima Goldsmith, tweeted: "Not the Naya [new] Pakistan we'd hoped for. 3 days after a defiant & brave speech defending the judiciary, Pakistan's gov caves in to extremist demands to bar #AsiaBibi from leaving Pak after she was acquitted of blasphemy, effectively signing her death warrant".

"If a state cannot stick to its orders and if its citizens [can] challenge the writ of the state and do not follow the orders and law, then this is a big question mark on state's stability," Kashif Hussain, a social media writer and activist, told AsiaNews.

Twitter has meanwhile suspended the account of the leader of the TLP, Khader Hussein Rizvi.

Four years since Christian couple burned alive for 'blasphemy'

In recent years, Pakistan, which is 96 per cent Muslim, has seen a surge in accusations of blasphemy, particularly against members of religious minorities.

For example, Pakistani Christians make up only around 2 per cent of the total population, but over a quarter (187) of the 702 blasphemy cases registered between 1990 and 2014 were against Christians.

Analysts say that accusations are frequently used to settle scores, or as a front for property grabs.

Four years ago yesterday, on 4 November 2014, a mob beat to near-death a Pakistani Christian and his five-months pregnant wife after it was alleged that she had set fire to some pages from a Quran. Shahzad Masih, 26, and Shama Bibi, 24, were then thrown into the large kiln where they worked as bonded labourers. They were burned alive.

In April 2016 a Lahore court allowed the kiln's owner, Yousuf Gujjar, to walk free and in November 2016 sentenced five men to death and jailed another eight men for two years. In March the same court acquitted 20 other suspects.

As in Noreen's case, an initial accusation was followed up by a local imam broadcasting over the mosque loudspeaker that Christians had committed blasphemy. Here, people from five villages formed a mob which beat the couple unconscious with hatchets and sticks, then doused them in petrol and threw them into the brick kiln.

Like Noreen, they could have escaped after the initial incident. In her case, she had no idea a case would ensue and continued to work picking berries, until five days later she was dragged in front of a mob of 1,000 people, and forced to "confess" to blasphemy.

In the couple's case, they were effectively modern-day slaves, who could not leave without paying off a huge interest-compounding loan from their brick kiln employer, which bound them to work for him.

Also, just days before Asia Bibi's victory in the Supreme Court, World Watch Monitor reported on the case of a 20-year-old Pakistani Christian who had been sentenced to life for blasphemy, despite having learning difficulties.

**Bibi is a respectful term for a married or older woman in Pakistan and other parts of South Asia, and not a family name.*

Protests break out following Asia Bibi's acquittal. Christian schools close indefinitely in Lahore

Police set up roadblocks on Punjab highways as radicals protest in the province and the capital Islamabad. The authorities are monitoring the situation from a central control centre, including "red zones" in sensitive areas.

By Kamran Chaudry

AsiaNews (31.10.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2PdYRrd> - This morning Pakistan's Supreme Court cleared Asia Bibi of all charges. The Christian woman spent nine years in prison for blasphemy is now free. Her acquittal has plunged the country into chaos and confusion.

Islamic radicals quickly reacted, organising demonstrations and roadblocks in the major cities. As a result, in Lahore, Church authorities ordered the indefinite closure of Christian schools and asked parents to come and take their children home. Likewise, "Schools will remain closed till further notice," said a sign at St Peter's High School, which is run by the Diocese of Raiwind of the Church of Pakistan.

In view of the situation, the Province of Punjab invoked Section 144 of the Penal Code, which forbids public demonstrations with more than four people. The ordinance was not enough to stop extremists in the streets of the provincial capital Lahore.

Police barriers blocked Tehreek-e-Labbaik demonstrators from reaching the Provincial Assembly building. Rangers were deployed in Youhanabad, Lahore's largest Christian enclave. The first arrests took place in the city of Multan.

After Punjab, Sindh too banned public gatherings under Section 144 over "possible terrorist activities".

Local authorities set up a control room to "monitor the prevailing law and order situation" and liaise with various agencies: police, other law enforcement agencies, commissioners and their deputies.

Meanwhile, Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan blocked the Power House Chowrangi roundabout in Karachi pledging to stop the whole city.

In the federal capital Islamabad, Jamaat-i-Islami party called on Muslims to join the protests.

The Capital Territory's deputy commissioner, Muhammad Hamza Shafqaat, tweeted that "Aabpara Chowk and Faizabad are blocked", but the "Bara Kahu, Tarnol and Kashmir Highway is still open."

For their part, police set up a "red zone" around Rawal Lake.

Pakistani Christian Asia Bibi has death penalty conviction overturned

By Sophia Saifi and James Griffiths

CNN (31.10.2018) - <https://cnn.it/2JsxC5V> - Pakistan's Supreme Court has acquitted a Christian woman who has been on death row for almost eight years on blasphemy charges.

Asia Bibi, a mother of five from Punjab province, was convicted of blasphemy in 2010 and sentenced to hang after she was accused of defiling the name of the Prophet Muhammed during an argument the year before with Muslim colleagues.

The workers had refused to drink from a bucket of water Asia Bibi had touched because she was not Muslim. At the time, Asia Bibi said the case was a matter of women who didn't like her "taking revenge."

She won her appeal against the conviction and subsequent death sentence on Wednesday.

The court quoted Shakespeare's "King Lear" in its ruling, saying Asia Bibi appeared to have been "more sinned against than sinning."

"Even if there was some grain of truth in the allegations leveled in this case against the appellant still the glaring contradictions in the evidence of the prosecution highlighted above clearly show that the truth in this case had been mixed with a lot which was untrue," the ruling said.

David Curry, CEO of Open Doors USA, an organization that lobbies on behalf of Christian minorities, said in a statement that "we are breathing a sigh of relief today."

"These charges stemmed from her Christian identity as well as false accusations against her," he said. "We are hopeful that Pakistan will now take additional steps to offer religious freedom and basic human rights throughout the country."

Islamist movement Tehreek-e Labbaik had previously vowed to take to the streets if Bibi was released, and protests broke out in Islamabad and Lahore soon after the ruling was announced.

Within hours, the protests were large enough that government officials in the cities were urging people to stay inside and avoid adding to the chaos.

Controversial law

Under the Pakistan penal code, the offense of blasphemy is punishable by death or life imprisonment. Widely criticized by international human rights groups, the law has been used disproportionately against minority religious groups in the country and to go after journalists critical of the Pakistani religious establishment.

Her case has attracted widespread outrage and support from Christians worldwide, and condemnation from conservative Islamist groups in Pakistan, who have demanded the death penalty be carried out and threatened widespread protests in the event of her being freed.

The case has been extremely divisive within Pakistani society, splitting liberals and conservatives and leaving even many supporters afraid to speak out on Asia Bibi's behalf.

In 2011, senior politician Salman Taseer was shot dead by his own bodyguard for voicing support for Asia Bibi and condemning the country's stringent blasphemy laws. His killer, Mumtaz Qadri, immediately surrendered to police and was later executed, becoming a martyr for many hardline Islamists.

At his funeral in 2016, thousands converged on the northern city of Rawalpindi as the Pakistani media was blacked out to prevent riots. Leaders of prominent Islamist political parties attended the funeral as supporters of Qadri carried signs in celebration of his "bravery."

Qadri's grave, in the capital city of Islamabad, has since become a shrine for those supporting Asia Bibi's death sentence.

Polarizing case

Amnesty International researcher Rabia Mehmood said that one of the reasons the Asia Bibi case has become so polarizing and controversial is the Pakistani government's failure to take "effective measures to curb the campaign of hate and violence incited by certain groups in the country following her conviction, in fact the state has shown immense tolerance for the narratives of hate."

She previously highlighted a tweet by a media organization linked to Tehreek-e Labbaik, which last year led to violent anti-blasphemy protests, warning the court to "think carefully before making any decision."

In May this year, Pakistan's Interior Minister, Ahsan Iqbal, was shot and wounded in his shoulder in an incident police sources linked to the 2017 demonstrations.

"We can only hope that (the Asia Bibi case) becomes a watershed moment when it comes to blasphemy laws in Pakistan," Mehmood said.

A verdict in Asia Bibi's favor, sends "out a message of hope and will be a step in addressing human rights abuses, religiously motivated discrimination and violence targeted at religious minorities and even Muslims who are accused of committing blasphemy."

CNN understands that at least two Western countries have offered Asia Bibi asylum once she has been released. Such a move will likely be greeted by mass protests by Islamist groups, which could turn violent.

It will also prove a key test for new Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, who courted the country's religious right during his successful campaign and has voiced support for blasphemy laws.

Khan should "take a stance against the intimidation of Tehreek-e-Labbaik, whose leaders have demanded that Khan fulfill his promises to make Pakistan an 'Islamic state'," Pakistani journalist Rafia Zakaria wrote for CNN last month.

"Instead of snubbing the international community, one that Islamists see as impinging on Pakistan's move toward a full theocracy, Khan could emphasize the need to embrace it and to work with it. In other words, Khan could choose to stand with the innocent woman instead of the rabid and bloodthirsty extremists."

Religious battle

Outside of Pakistan, Asia Bibi's case has become a rallying call for many Christians, particularly Catholics.

Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) led prayers for Asia Bibi's release last week in the UK, at a ceremony attended by her husband Ashiq Masih and daughter, Eisham Ashiq.

"We have prayed 10 years now for our sister, Asia, and I am confident that our prayers will be heard, and the judgment will go in favor of Asia, her family and the entire Pakistani Christian community," Father Emmanuel Yousaf said in a statement from the group.

The family met with Pope Francis at the Vatican in February, during which the Catholic leader reportedly described Asia Bibi as a "martyr," according to ACN President Alessandro Mondeduro.

Francis' predecessor, Pope Benedict, previously called for Asia Bibi's release.

In her 2012 book "Get Me Out of Here," Asia Bibi included a letter to her family urging them not to "lose courage or faith in Jesus Christ."

Pakistani Christian gets life for blasphemy despite learning difficulties

By Asif Aqeel

World Watch Monitor (26.10.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2CL5Xfk> - Mentally impaired Yaqoob Bashir Masih was only 20 years old when he was accused of committing blasphemy in June 2015. He has been in prison ever since, and now his hometown District and Sessions Court in Mirpur Khas, a small district in Pakistan's Sindh province, has sentenced him to life-long imprisonment for burning a booklet that contained verses of the Quran.

According to International Christian Concern, two appeals from the family to release him on bail were filed, but the trial court and later the Sindh High Court rejected them.

Masih, locally known by the name "Kala", is known to have learning difficulties. After he was charged, Mushtaq Masih*, Yaqoob's next-door neighbour in the Mehmoodabad area, told World Watch Monitor what happened:

"It was around 7pm and I was sitting with my wife on our camel cart. We were discussing how earning our daily living had become so tough when we started hearing the noise of a group of a people.

"I heard Yaqoob's elder brother asking him, 'Where is the copy of the Quran which the cleric gave you this morning?'

"Yaqoob was not telling them, and he kept naming a few other neighbours. The mob were severely beating him, but Yaqoob did not tell them where the Quran was. In the end, some of them doused him with kerosene oil and told him that they would set him on fire if he would not tell them. Then he told them that he had burned it in the morning and then buried it."

Some locals reported that "Yaqoob used to go to the cleric, who had told him that his mental condition would improve if he recited the Quran".

Mushtaq Masih went on: "That morning Yaqoob requested the cleric to give him the copy of the Quran, saying that his two sisters would read it to him. But rather than bringing it home, he burned it."

It was reported that a few students of a nearby madrassah (an Islamic seminary) had seen him burning the Quran, after which they informed a cleric.

Mushtaq Masih explained: "About two years ago Yaqoob had started learning 'black magic' and, since then, he sometimes acted quite erratically. Most of the time he was fine but sometimes he behaved as if he had no control over himself.

"For instance, his mother told the crowd that only three days before the incident, Yaqoob had torn the Bible into four pieces and thrown it on the floor.

"The police were informed of Yaqoob's confession and they arrived to arrest him. But still a mob was gathering."

In Pakistan, blasphemy against Islam is an extremely sensitive subject, with allegations often leading to mob violence. For this reason, even police officers fear reprisals for investigating blasphemy cases, or judges for finding in favour of those accused.

Imtiaz Amanat, Legal Aid Coordinator at the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, told ICC that Pakistan's "blasphemy laws need reform. There are a number of case studies where these laws have been misused against the most vulnerable segments of the society."

Following the conviction, a petition on Masih's behalf will be filed within a month in the Sindh High Court to challenge the decision. However, it will likely take years before his petition will be heard and he could be released.

Asia Bibi, a Christian woman accused of blasphemy in 2009, was sentenced to death in 2010 and is still awaiting the outcome of her appeal.

**The name "Masih", which derives from "Messiah", has been used for whole Christian communities for many years in Pakistan and does not necessarily signify a family connection.*

Islamic groups threaten Supreme Court judges ahead of Asia Bibi ruling

World Watch Monitor (11.10.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2NMeaSs> - Radical religious groups in Pakistan have called for mass protests and threatened the judges of the country's Supreme Court in Islamabad ahead of their ruling in the blasphemy case of Christian woman Asia Bibi.

The hardline Islamic party, the Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), threatened the judges in a press conference on YouTube, saying that if Aasiya Noreen, commonly known as Asia Bibi, were to receive clemency, the justices would meet a "horrible" end, reported AFP.

Meanwhile another religious group, the Red Mosque in Islamabad, asked the Supreme Court to order that, if Asia Bibi is released, she would not be able to leave the country.

"Western forces are trying to get Asia Bibi out of the country but she should be hanged," the petitioner, Hafiz Ihtesham Ahmed, told AFP.

The TLP also announced it would hold a rally on Friday, 12 October, and on social media radical voices call for Asia Bibi to be hanged.

Pakistan's Supreme Court heard the much-delayed appeal of Asia Bibi, on Monday, 8 October. It did not announce its decision, saying it would 'reserve judgment' for several days or possibly weeks.

The story of Asia Bibi

Noreen received the death penalty in 2010 after she allegedly made derogatory comments about Islam's prophet Muhammad during an argument with a Muslim woman.

In June 2009, Noreen, then about 38, was picking berries in the fields as a day labourer in Sheikhpura, outside Lahore in eastern Pakistan. It was hot. She brought water to a female co-worker, who objected that the touch of a Christian had made the water haram, or religiously forbidden for Muslims. The woman apparently told Noreen to convert to Islam in order to become purified of her ritual impurity. Noreen's rejoinder was perceived as an insult to Islam. She was arrested, accused of blasphemy against the Prophet and the Qur'an, and has been in prison ever since.

The Muslim woman, with her sister, were the only two eyewitnesses in the case, but the defence failed to convince the appeals judges that their evidence lacked credibility.

In the Lahore High Court appeal hearing in October 2014, Bibi's then-lawyer, Naeem Shakir, argued that the main complainant in the case, the local Muslim cleric Mohamed Salaam, had not heard Bibi blaspheme, and that his original complaint had been lodged only five days after the women's quarrel. Shakir argued that, during her 2010 trial, the only reason given for this delay was "deliberation and consultation", and said that Salaam had acknowledged this in court.

Salaam was filmed by an international film crew for a film about Bibi in 2014, saying that it is his religious obligation to defend the dignity of Muhammad and that is why he decided to be a witness before the court. He only heard Bibi allegedly confess to blasphemy when she had been brought before a village council several days after the quarrel.

Her other main accuser, Mohamed Imran, owner of the field in which Noreen worked, was not present at the time of the quarrel either; he was away from the village.

However, the High Court ruled that it had no choice but to let the conviction and death penalty stand, based on the way the country's laws are written, and on what it characterised as an inept trial defence.

At the same time, the court asked Pakistan's lawmakers to craft legislation that would empower trial courts to apply a test that would make future blasphemy convictions much more difficult to achieve.

'You have to be in hiding'

Noreen's lawyer then filed an appeal with Pakistan's Supreme Court and in July 2015 it agreed it would hear Noreen's case.

Commentators praised the Court for its courage to hear the appeal in the face of strong public sentiment against anyone seen to denigrate Islam, with some calling it a "historic day for Pakistan".

However, the appeal stalled in late 2016 when one member of the three-judge panel recused himself.

In April 2018 Pakistan's chief justice, Saqib Nisar, told Noreen's lawyer, Saif-ul-Malook, that he would hear Asia's appeal soon.

Since then Malook, who was the prosecution lawyer in the case of the murder of Punjab Governor Taseer, has been under 24-hours protection. Ahead of the hearing in Islamabad on 8 October he told AP News, "I have lost my health. I am a high blood pressure patient, my privacy is totally lost. You have to be in hiding," as everyone knew his identity. "They look at this house and they know this is the home of a person who can be killed at any time by angry mullahs," he said.

Pakistan's Supreme Court is the last possibility for Noreen to see her death sentence repealed or she has to appeal to the President for mercy.

International attention

Bibi's case has attracted global attention, much of it critical of Pakistan's anti-blasphemy laws, which critics contend are routinely abused as a pretext to settle personal scores.

In 2011 two prominent Pakistani politicians, Salmaan Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti, were assassinated after they spoke publicly in Bibi's defence.

Following the killing of Taseer, Governor of Punjab, Bibi's husband said she was "very afraid". "She knows the Muslims have announced a price on her head and would go to any lengths to kill her," he said. Authorities increased her security and moved her to an all-women facility, Multan Prison.

In May 2018 another politician who has championed the country's minority communities, Ahsan Iqbal, survived an assassination attempt by a gunman protesting against the country's blasphemy laws.

Pope Benedict XVI made a public plea for clemency and the EU's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Jan Figel', told Pakistani officials that the renewal of their export privileges to Europe would depend on the release of Asia Bibi.

Pakistani Christians fear more violence if they press charges over attack

World Watch Monitor (26.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2NYXxYI> - A land dispute between Christian and Muslim villagers in rural Pakistan ended with a mob attack on the Christian community, but no charges against the attackers.

A 10-year-old boy's arm was broken and two women were beaten and had their clothes torn when a mob of at least men and women descended upon the Christian community in Warn village, Kasur district, on 2 August.

This came after false accusations that Christian youths had stoned a Muslim man to death for attempting to claim land belonging to the Christians, who make up around a fifth of the village's population.

Now, almost two months later, the Christian villagers, who are mostly illiterate and work as labourers at the local brick kiln, say they are too scared to file an official complaint with the police, for fear of further attacks.

One local Christian, Bashir Masih, third from the right in the above photo, told World Watch Monitor his community wouldn't "expect anything to come out of it" if the matter were investigated. "Rather it will fan more hatred and they will come back to beat us again," he said.

Why the attack?

Earlier on the day of the attack, a dispute had taken place over a piece of land belonging to the local Catholic church, St. Matthew's, which borders on a field owner by a Muslim man, Mukhtar Hussain.

In January, Hussain had filed an application with the local court to cultivate the land. His application was rejected, but, on 2 August, he and five others, including his three sons, began clearing the area with a tractor.

"It was around 10am and most of the men had gone to work when Mukhtar's sons started clearing the land," recalled Bashir Masih, who is the church treasurer. "Immediately, Christians, who were mostly women and children, started gathering there and tried to stop them. Seventy-year-old Mukhtar and others were holding sticks and beat two Christian women, Biquis Bibi, 35, and Nasreen Bibi, 60. At this, young [Christian] children threw stones at them and one hit Mukhtar on his nose and blood started coming out.

"These Muslims immediately spread news that he had died after Christians hit him with a stone.

"After only a few minutes, about 50 to 60 men and women gathered and unleashed an attack on the houses of Christians. They beat anyone they found and, when Christians locked themselves in their houses, they smashed the entrance gates and also scaled walls. Inside the houses, they insulted women, beat them and injured them.

"We were working about a kilometre away at our brick kiln. When we were informed about this, we rushed to our homes and also informed the police. Mukhtar's people were still beating Christians inside their homes when the police arrived.

"Despite the court's order, Mukhtar has encroached the land and we are so powerless in this matter."

World Watch Monitor asked the local police chief, Muhammad Idrees, why there had been no arrests. He said the police had not yet received a complaint from the Christian community and could not act without one.

Christians told they can't have a church in Muslim-majority village

World Watch Monitor (04.06.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2sG1SSU> - Christians in a village in Pakistan's Punjab province have been told to remove every visible sign of Christianity from their church, six months after being forced to sign a form pledging they would no longer hold services.

The 40 Christian families in Nayya Sarabah (Chak 336) village, part of Toba Tek Singh district near Faisalabad, haven't held a service since before Christmas.

Muslim resident Hajji Muhammad Siddique told World Watch Monitor that, as "Muslims are in the majority in the village, we can't allow a church here".

"Now we are working with the civil administration to give a piece of land to Christians outside the village," said Siddique, 73, who runs a dispensary. "When it is done, we will make the Christians write an agreement that they will sell this current church building or at least dismantle the church structure and crosses."

"Most of the Christians of the village work as brick-kiln labourers," he added. "It is only Rifaqat Masih, who, being a retired army personnel, is trying to be a leader and has helped build a church in the village."

The church is run by Pastor Samuel Masih, but it is Rifaqat Masih, a union councillor for minorities, who has been at the forefront of efforts to resolve the matter.

"Muslims are in the majority in the village, so we can't allow a church here."

Most of the Christians are poor labourers. The church belongs to Full Gospel Assemblies, an evangelical group working in Pakistan, and was built on land belonging to 70-year-old Christian named Rafiq Masih.

"Rafiq is childless, so he bequeathed this property for the construction of a church building," Rifaqat Masih told World Watch Monitor. "The construction began in 2012 and we had been holding worship services since then. But in December 2016 the local Muslims objected over it and filed an application against us in the local police station. At that time, a compromise was reached and we again started holding services. But, again, in December 2017, they submitted an application in the police station, after which we were called in and were told to sign an agreement."

The police station in the nearby town of Rajana brought together Muslims and Christians of the village on 14 December 2017, and had them sign an agreement according to which the Christians would "hold religious ceremonies in their houses. There will be no programme in the church. If anyone will violate this agreement, then legal action will be taken. [Christians] will not gather in any house for a religious programme. If there will be any violation of this, legal action will be taken".

That same month, the Muslims submitted an application to close down the church, and the local police and civil administration told the Christians that, as their church was not included on the official list of churches that must be provided with security on Sundays, they could no longer hold services.

(Due to the rise of terrorism, all gatherings in Pakistan are provided police security. Churches are provided security on Sunday or any other given day that Christians request police protection. However, in this case, the police told them that the church is not part of the authorised list of churches, so they cannot be provided security. Now, because security cannot be provided, they cannot come together. So in the name of security, they stopped the Christians from gathering in the church, and also from worshipping in any house.)

The Christians in the village have therefore not held a service this year, but have made frequent visits to the civil administration to either permit them to hold services in their church or to provide them with an alternative venue.

'We are being forced to demolish the church'

Christian and Muslim villagers were called together for another meeting on Saturday, 2 June, held in the presence of Deputy Superintendent of Police Muhammad Tahir.

After the meeting, Rafaqat Masih told World Watch Monitor: "We are being forced to demolish the existing church structure and, in lieu of this, they would let us build a church on a piece of government land outside the village which is already dedicated for a school.

"They haven't even given any documentary proof that this piece of land would be transferred to Christians. Then another issue is that we worked for several years to construct this church building. Now who is going to pay for building from scratch?"

Masih, who runs a small shop in the village, told World Watch Monitor that he had submitted an application to the Toba Tek Singh Deputy Commissioner for including the name of the church in the list of the churches which are provided security.

"The civil administration tells us that they cannot provide us security, so it is in our benefit that they have stopped us from holding a church service," he said.

On 22 February, the Toba Tek Singh Deputy Commissioner wrote a letter to the district police chief, a copy of which World Watch Monitor has seen, saying: "Priest (sic) Samuel (sic) and others of Chak No. 336/GB (Nia Saraba) Tehsil and District Toba Tek Singh has informed the [respectable] Deputy Commissioner that they have established a church in said village and the police has not permitted them to offer their prayers... I have been directed by the [respectable] Deputy Commissioner to convey you that the tension between both the parties/communities may cause an untoward situation. In view of the sensitivity of the issue, you are requested to please look into the matter at personal level and resolve the issue, to avoid any law and order situation, which may result in disturbing the peace and tranquillity of society."

Deputy Superintendent Muhammad Tahir told World Watch Monitor that the Christians being forced to pledge to end services was not legal. "We are trying to amicably resolve this matter," he said.

Rasheed Jalal, a member of the district council belonging to the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, said the Christians were "not being treated equally".

He said he had met with several senior government figures, including the Provincial Minister for Human Rights and Minority Affairs, National Assembly members and Muslim clerics, but that "nothing worked".

"Christians are peace-loving people," said Full Gospel Assemblies Principal Dr. Liaquat M. Qaiser. "We don't desire any conflict. If the local Muslims do not want Christians worshipping among them, then they should provide them an alternative place. They are poor people and do not have resources to buy another place and build a church once again."

Officials take part in a new assault on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community

FOREF (26.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2IVkTrf> - **The Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe (FOREF) condemns in the strongest terms the 23 May 2018 attack on the Baitul Mubarak Mosque in Sialkot, Pakistan, which resulted in the near destruction of the facility. The mosque has historical and spiritual importance for the Ahmadiyya Community.**

According to information received by FOREF and media reports, the violence began with the destruction the house of Hakim Hassamuddin by the members of the Municipal Committee of Sialkot, who were escorted by local police. A mob of around 600 persons, reportedly from the local Sunni Muslim community, joined in for the attack on the nearby mosque, chanting anti-Ahmadiyya slogans. The attack took place over a period of about seven hours. Officials claim repairs on the building were illegal.

The Ahmadiyya Community characterized the incident as “vandalism of buildings by the governmental administration for the mere satisfaction of extremist forces without any judicial order.”

“The government of Pakistan must conduct an impartial investigation and bring the perpetrators of these crimes, including local officials, to justice, and ensure that reparations are made for the damages done to these holy places,” according to Dr. Aaron Rhodes, President of FOREF.

“Our organization and other independent human rights institutions are ready to work with Pakistani authorities to put in place laws and policies that are consistent with Pakistan’s international legal human rights obligations to protect all religious minorities,” he added.

For more information:

Dr. Aaron Rhodes – President: aaronarhodes@gmail.com
Peter Zoehrer – Director General: foref.office@gmail.com

Links to news media accounts of the incident are below.

- <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistani-mob-destroys-ahmadi-mosque/4407754.html>
- <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/5/24/historic-ahmadi-mosque-demolished-by-mob-in-pakistan>
- <https://www.rabwah.net/pakistani-mob-destroys-historic-mosque/>
- <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/mob-demolishes-ahmadiyya-mosque-in-pakistan/article23978822.ece>
- <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-ahmadis/pakistani-mob-destroys-100-year-old-minority-ahmadi-mosque-idUSKCN1IP20H>
- <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/mob-demolishes-mosque-belonging-to-minority-sect-in-pakistan/articleshow/64305273.cms>
- <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/320990-ahmedi-worship-place-partially-demolished-in-sialkot>
- <https://www.dawn.com/news/1409714/local-authorities-demolish-ahmadis-historical-building-mob-vandalises-place-of-worship>
- <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/5/24/historic-ahmadi-mosque-demolished-by-mob-in-pakistan>
- <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistani-mob-destroys-ahmadi-mosque/4407754.html>
- https://tribune.com.pk/story/1717928/1-mob-razes-historic-ahmadi-property-sialkot/?amp=1&_twitter_impression=true
- https://dailytimes.com.pk/244101/mob-led-by-pti-leader-rains-down-misery-on-ahmadi-community-desecrates-worship-site-in-sialkot/amp/?_twitter_impression=true
- <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/05/24/mob-attacks-ahmedi-sacred-site-worship-place-in-sialkot/>

Pakistani court hands down 14 years in prison for rape of 7 year-old Christian girl

World Watch Monitor (25.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2LCt7qk> - A Pakistani court has sentenced a young man who raped a seven year old Christian girl on Easter Day four years ago, to 14 years in prison and a fine of 200,000 Pakistani rupees (c.US \$2,000).

The verdict has been greeted by activists, as one of the few examples where prosecutions on behalf of Christians are finally seen through to a conclusion in court.

Judge Chaudhry Zulfiqar Ali announced the verdict on May 2 in the presence of the man, Fakhr-e-Alam, alias Phool, who was immediately sent to Sialkot District Jail.

Alam was around 17 years old at the time of the crime. The court awarded punishment after the police investigation report and the medical examination corroborated evidence produced by the prosecution.

Maximum punishment for rape in Pakistani law is 25 years' imprisonment. The court, however, considered that Alam was a juvenile and had committed no other crime before. The incident took place on April 20, 2014 when Saira Bibi, living in a village of Sialkot's Daska town, went out at around 12pm to a nearby shop.

Saira, during the trial, boldly submitted that she was going to the shop when "accused Fakhr-i-Alam met her. He lifted her and took her" to a nearby compound, owned by Akhtar Ali Nagra, a local landlord, where he raped her until her two brothers Shahbaz and Emmanuel Masih arrived to rescue her, "whereupon the accused Fakhr-i-Alam fled away."

Right after the incident, two local landlords, Ahmad Yar Nagra and Zulifqar Nagra, pressurized Saira's family not to go to the police. This became possible only after the news was picked up by local TV and newspapers. The victim was still mentally and physically traumatized when she was taken to the hospital two days later.

Due to media coverage, the [Supreme Court of Pakistan took notice](#) of the incident and ordered the provincial head of the police to submit the police investigation report. The Chief Minister of the Punjab, Mian Shahbaz Sharif, also took notice, and said he would ensure that he'd bring the culprit to justice.

However, the victim's family faced – and continue to face – many challenges, including threats, social stigma, and loss of livelihood and household. Because of threats, the family had to leave the village right after the incident and came to the city area of Sialkot where they now have to live on the roadside.

"Our heavenly father is with us and we are not afraid of anything," Saira's mother Shaguftah Bibi told World Watch Monitor. "Only days before the court decision came, my husband was working with a landlord nearby who removed him from service because we had refused to withdraw our case.

"Few days ago, two men stopped my son Shahbaz, who brought the case, to tell him that all four sons would now suffer consequences. I told him if anyone says this to him next time, he must tell them to do whatever they want, but only dare to come in the daylight, so others can see what is being done to us."

'Stay firm for justice'

Lawyer Riaz Anjum, who represented the victim, told World Watch Monitor that the suspect had no case, so the defence strategy “kept lingering on by not presenting evidence in court, to demoralize the [victim’s] family.”

Alam’s counsel pleaded that Saira was raped by a man who was his namesake Phool, so the police had mistaken *his* identity. He pleaded that, because of huge pressure on police from the Chief Minister, they had implicated Alam to satisfy high officials that they had arrested a suspect.

The court, however, held that “Nothing tangible was brought to discredit the [prosecution] testimony ... the victim named Fakhr-i-Alam in her statement... Accused has failed to point out any malafide or ill-will on the part of prosecution witnesses to falsely depose against him.” The court also observed that two brothers and their mother would not collude to bring shame on Saira:

“[So] it is not expected from such close kith and kin that they would spare the actual culprit to go scot-free, by falsely involving the accused in this case. Substitution is a rare phenomenon. No one would like to bring stigma on the chastity of his sister/daughter, with a view to implicate someone, and to put at stake the honour of their sister/daughter. It cannot also be believed that the victim would put her [future] career, personal respect and family honour at stake by fabricating a fake story...in absence of any motive ... the ocular account is supported by medical evidence”.

Lawyer Anjum said that problems for the family hadn’t ended yet as Alam has challenged the court decision. Saira’s mother says “We will stay firm for justice by His Grace.”

Christians account about 1.5 percent, roughly 3 to 5 million, of the total population and they are the poorest minority in the overwhelming Muslim-majority country. [Pakistan](#) is 5th on the [2018 Open Doors World Watch List](#) of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

Because Christians in Pakistan are a tiny minority and are extremely poor, and the country has poor rule of law, crimes against Christians with impunity are commonplace.

Landmark judgment on Pakistani religious minorities yet to be honoured by the state

World Watch Monitor (14.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2ItPADK> - When a bomber killed 127 people at a Pakistan church, the country’s Supreme Court issued a list of instructions to the government to protect religious minorities. Four years later, the government has yet to follow most of them.

As with the religious freedom guaranteed in Pakistan’s constitution, the government’s lacklustre response to the court’s instructions reveals the gap between the ideals contained in official documents and the disillusioning reality for Christians and other minorities in the overwhelmingly Muslim country.

“Our constitution, laws and public policy by and large conform to international standards, but the problem is with many countervailing factors that take over the system,” said Sarwar Bari, national director of the rights group Pattan, based in Pakistan’s capital Islamabad. “So the judgment alone is not enough. There must be mechanisms developed to overcome those countervailing factors.”

Those factors loomed large at a 9-10 May gathering of religious minorities, scholars, intellectuals, parliamentarians and government officials, including Bari, who gathered in Islamabad. It was organised by the National Commission for Human Rights, an autonomous public body, in collaboration with Community World Service Asia, a national civil society organisation mainly working in livelihood, health and education.

The meeting was titled, 'National Convention on the June 19th Judgment', referring to a landmark order handed down that day in 2014 by then-Chief Justice Tasadduq Hussain Jilani, following the September 2013 bombing in All Saints' Memorial Church in Peshawar, which killed at least 127 people and injured 250.

Acting on his own and not at the request of any party, Justice Jilani issued seven instructions to the Pakistan government:

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

No work has been done on any aspect of the judgment except school curricula, said Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, a member of the Pakistan National Assembly who holds a seat reserved for minorities.

In December 2015 the higher-education department of Punjab province told the Supreme Court that a new committee had issued seven recommendations on curriculum reforms. The justices were told that "myopic interpretation" of religion would be removed and students would be encouraged to learn Islam's "spirit of pluralism", according to Pakistan's Express Tribune news service.

"This is the only area where Sindh [province] and Punjab governments have made progress, but still it will take time to take its final shape," Vankwani told World Watch Monitor. An example: the Balochistan province Public Service Commission chairman, Justice Kailash Naath Kohli, recommended religious minorities should be taught ethics instead of Islamic studies.

Chaudhry Shafique, a member of the National Commission for Human Rights, said there's still a need to capture all the aspects of the June 19th Judgment and the progress made since it was issued. The convention, however, was not a simple exercise in measuring government response to the Supreme Court justice's instructions. Issues beyond the ruling itself were debated.

Government indifference

There were those at the conference who said a fundamental concern is the government's indifference to structures already in place to defend religious freedom. The Ministry for Religious Affairs and Religious Harmony, for example, is mainly responsible for Muslim pilgrimage travel to Saudi Arabia. The ministry oversees the National Commission for Minorities, created in 1990, but the National Assembly was recently told the commission has no rules of business in place, and even its legal status is "not clear".

And while Pakistan's constitution guarantees each citizen "the right to profess, practise and propagate his religion", and every denomination "shall have the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institution", the reality is different, said the chairman of the National Commission for Human Rights, Justice Ali Nawaz Chowhan.

School curriculum in some provinces promotes an Islamic way of life to all, including to non-Muslims, in defiance of the constitution, he said. The government already has watchdogs in place to police such matters, but Chowhan said they are starved for resources.

"There is religious hatred and people are not indoctrinated with religious harmony, which should permeate to the grassroots level from where problems like blasphemy are arising," he said. "But it is not happening because the Religious Affairs Ministry is dormant and not performing its due duty in the manner it should."

Even as Pakistan's constitution promises religious liberty, its penal code forbids blasphemy against Islam. Most defendants in blasphemy cases are religious minorities, including Christians, who make up only 4 per cent of Pakistan's population.

"Religious minorities cannot be provided justice until the society and state throw out malice and consider them equal citizens of Pakistan," Vankwani said.

As sympathetic to religious minorities as they may be, the 2014 instructions from the Supreme Court justice also treat minorities as an object needing protection from the rest of society, said human rights lawyer Atif Jamil.

"Minorities should be seen as equal citizens of the country and not a people who are alien or temporarily residing as refugees," he said.

Quotas for minorities

The convention also surfaced the long-running debate in Pakistan over job and education quotas for minorities.

"Our collective efforts have resulted in the approval of 5 per cent job quota for minorities. Now we need to put our efforts for the education quota," said National Assembly member Aasiya Nasir. Her bill to establish minority quotas in higher education was rejected by the Assembly on the grounds that it undermines the spirit of merit.

Dr. Mukhtar Ahmed, former chairman of Pakistan's Higher Education Commission, argued against Nasir's "Minorities Access to Higher Education Bill" in the National Assembly, and again spoke against minority quotas at the 9-10 May convention. He said his opposition arose not from personal conviction, but from the advice of universities.

"We should not go for quotas but encourage our minority students to compete and excel," Ahmed said. "If this nation is to rise, it has to invest in education. Education is the remedy to all sorts of discrimination. We should provide between 2,000-4,000 scholarships to the youth to encourage the youth towards higher education. It is our duty to provide equal opportunities to everyone. But not through quotas for the marginalised."

Yet quotas had their defenders. The Public Service Commission Chairman of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Fareedullah Khan, told the convention he would assure that minorities were given their due representation in government jobs. "This is my highest moral commitment and you all are invited to guide me on how to go about it," he said.

At the end of the convention, Chowhan announced that a committee comprising intellectuals and activists would prepare a white paper to be submitted to the Parliament, Senate and other human-rights bodies.

Bereaved parents accept compensation but suspect walks free

World Watch Monitor (10.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2GeAekG> - The family of a Christian boy beaten to death on his second day in secondary school have accepted the offer of compensation from the family of the accused.

The Islamic concept of paying diyat (blood money) to the victim's family allowed the suspect to walk free.

Sharoon Masih, 17, was beaten to death in a classroom at MC Model High School in Burewala, Punjab province, in August 2017.

Fellow student Ahmed Raza was arrested and jailed for the attack, but later [released on bail](#) after a court said there was "no clear evidence" connecting him with Masih's death.

On 26 April, Burewala Additional Sessions Judge Naveed Khaliq acquitted Raza of a murder charge and freed him, citing section 319 of Pakistan's Penal Code, which states: "Whoever commits qatl-i-khata [homicide by mistake] shall be liable to diyat."

Khurram Shahzad Maan, Executive Director of the Organisation for Legal Aid, an affiliate of the European Centre for Law and Justice, told World Watch Monitor that Pakistan's government revises the amount fixed for diyat every year. "This year it is fixed at 1,935,594 rupees (US \$17,000), while the family was offered 1,550,000 (US \$13,500), which they have accepted," he said.

In April World Watch Monitor reported that the [alleged killers of Arsalan Masih, 16, had compensated his family with three million rupees](#) – a sum higher than the amount fixed by the government. The outcome was described as a "rare victory" by a lawyer working for the Masih family.

Masih's mother Razia Bibi told World Watch Monitor that they had forgiven the suspect because even his hanging would not bring back her son. "It is a lifelong wound that we are to live with but we hope that Ahmed would realise what terrible wrong he has done to us," she said.

How events unfolded

Sharoon Masih was on only his second day at MC Model High School in Burewala, when it was alleged that classmate Raza Ahmed attacked and killed him, on 30 August 2017.

Pakistani media reporting the case alleged the behaviour (and possible negligence) of school staff contributed to Masih's death. His mother said Ahmed had stopped her son from drinking water two days before his murder.

Pakistani Christians are often treated with contempt, compounded because many come from a downtrodden "untouchable caste" with whom some Muslims refuse to drink and eat.

(The Christian Asia Bibi still [remains on death row](#) for blasphemy, nine years after she was first arrested for offering a cup of water to fellow workers in a field on a hot day: two Muslims refused to take the cup as, they said, she had made it 'unclean', simply through her religion and caste.)

Kicked 'till he was unconscious'

Deputy Superintendent of Police Javed Tahir Majeed was one of the three senior police officers investigating Masih's murder.

He told World Watch Monitor at the time: "Sharoon's classmate, Sabir Ali, told us that Sharoon was sitting at the back of the classroom. When he got up to walk through the benches, Raza sprawled his legs out to block his way, telling him he could not go out. When Sharoon tried to get past Raza's legs, Raza started to beat him up. Sabir tried to intervene but Raza beat him up as well.

"Raza denied to us that he physically touched Sharoon but the entire class testified that he kept beating Sharoon even when he fell on the ground, and kept kicking him till he was unconscious. Raza is tall and well built. He has a reputation for fighting even outside the school."

Masih had just started at the High School in Burewala, after completing lower education in his village. District Police Officer Umar Saeed Malik, who visited the family, told World Watch Monitor that, as it was only Masih's second day, it was less likely that there was any issue of a Muslim-Christian conversation.

According to Malik, Ahmed alleged that on his first day, Masih had broken the screen of a mobile telephone that Ahmed had brought to school. However, police investigations proved the screen was already broken. "Probably Raza was pressuring Sharoon to extract money by bullying him," Malik said.

Masih's teacher 'slapped him'

Sharoon Masih's father, Ilyasab, told World Watch Monitor in September that on his son's first day, the teacher wouldn't let his son attend as he wasn't wearing the right school uniform and even slapped him in front of the class.

"Sharoon told his mother that students hated him because of his religion and he was not comfortable to go to school," he said.

Ilyasab said he told his son, "I will go to school with you and talk to the teacher and students."

"It often takes a few days to settle down in a new place," he added. "The next day Sharoon didn't go to school and went to buy his uniform himself. The next day he went back, but before I could go and meet the teacher and his classmates, he was killed."

Deputy Superintendent Majeed said eyewitnesses confirmed that Ahmed kicked Masih in the stomach.

"We have seen cases where a little beating can result in death, so it's quite plausible a hit in the belly resulted in death," he said.

Autopsy showed 'no sign' of trauma

The autopsy noted that “no sign of any physical trauma was seen on the body”. A chemical examination of internal organs had not been conducted at this point.

Ilyasab Masih said he did not know whether there were marks of violence on his son’s body.

“I was so overcome with grief that I could not ask if his body had signs of injury,” he said. “I couldn’t even ask who gave the body its last ritual wash.”

The boy’s killing heightened fear among Pakistani Christians.

Sub-inspector Kashif said there were at least 24 Christian students in the school at the time; Deputy Superintendent Majeed said school staff told his team there are 47. One staff member was also a Christian.

Open Doors’ 2018 World Watch List – of the 50 countries in which it is most difficult to be a Christian – [places Pakistan at number 5](#). The 2011 Pew Research Centre’s ‘[Rising Restrictions on Religion](#)’ report characterises Pakistan as the third-least-tolerant country to religious diversity, while another Pew report, ‘[Common Concerns About Islamic Extremism: Muslim-Western Tensions Persist](#)’, says that only 16 per cent of Muslims in Pakistan hold a positive opinion of Christians.

Pakistani Christian dies after being set on fire by Muslim in alleged dispute over who should convert

World Watch Monitor (23.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2vGZIqP> - A Christian woman from north-eastern Pakistan has died from her injuries after being set on fire by a Muslim man, who claims it was an accident and followed a discussion about which of them should convert if they were to marry.

Asma Yaqoob, 24, died in a Lahore hospital yesterday (22 April) after suffering 80 per cent burns during an incident at her employer’s house at 11pm last Tuesday (17 April). She had been transferred from her local hospital in Sialkot, 120km north of Lahore, because of the extent of her injuries.

Asma, who was illiterate, worked as a domestic servant at a house owned by Saeed-uz-Zamaan, a few streets away from her home in Bogra village, her father, Yaqoob Masih, told World Watch Monitor.

According to the First Information Report filed at Sialkot police station by Masih: “There was a knock on the gate and Asma went to answer. A little later her cries were heard and everyone rushed outside and saw her on fire.”

Masih told World Watch Monitor that he did not know anything about the man accused of the attack – Muhammad Rizwan Gujur – before this incident. “When the police were taking Asma’s statement, then I came to know that Gujur was pressuring her to convert to Islam and marry him,” he said.

Masih added that he initially thought his daughter had been the victim of an acid attack.

Gujur has been charged under Section 336 of the Pakistan Penal Code, which deals with grievous bodily harm, and is being tried in an anti-terrorism court.

Sub-Inspector Shahid Mehmood, the investigating officer, confirmed to World Watch Monitor that Gujur had been arrested, and explained what the suspect had told investigating officers: "Gujur lived in the same area [as Asma]. He bought petrol from a nearby filling station before seeing Asma that night. They were in a relationship and were struggling over the issue of marriage.

"During the investigation, Gujur said that Asma wanted him to convert to Christianity but he wanted her to convert to Islam. Both of them were unwilling to abandon their religions so Asma wanted to make a final decision about the matter that night.

"Gujur told investigators that he bought petrol that night, poured some on the ground and said that if none of us can convert then let's die together. Gujur said that he lit the match only to threaten her but the match fell, she caught fire and he fled from the scene."

Mehmood added that Gujur was not mentally stable as a result of the suicide of his mother ten years ago.

According to BBC Urdu the opinion of the police is that Gujur did not intend to hurt Asma, just threaten her, and that the fire was an accident.

Mumtaz Mughal, Provincial Head of the Aurat Foundation, a national women's rights organisation, told World Watch Monitor: "The statement from the police shows that the suspect will be given a way to get out of this by describing it as an accident, and saying that Gujur is not mentally stable.

"Women and minorities are vulnerable sections of society and a woman from a minority is further vulnerable. So, in such cases, the government must become the complainant – otherwise there will be huge pressure on the family to withdraw the case."

The Aurat Foundation said it will be closely monitoring the case.

Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan face an existential threat: New report

FOREF Europe (27.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2uwDWpa> - **The persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan has worsened in the last several years, as Ahmadis are "violently targeted, intimidated, and harassed at all levels of society.**

Impunity and incitement have created a climate of religious hysteria in which targeted communities, both Ahmadis and non-Ahmadis are losing their lives with shocking increased frequency," according to a report published by the International Human Rights Committee and the Asian Human Rights Commission, in partnership with the Forum for Religious Freedom – Europe (FOREF) and Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

"A noose is tightening around the Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, who face discriminatory legislation and lethal mob violence encouraged by political and governmental authorities," according to Dr Aaron Rhodes, President of FOREF.

The 100-page document, which is based on interviews with hundreds of victims, experts, and journalists, details the legal discrimination faced by the Ahmadi community, relevant developments in international human rights, and social and political tendencies.

It further documents crimes, state negligence, and complicity; violations of internationally guaranteed rights and freedoms; prejudice and social exclusion; discrimination faced by women; discrimination in education; and obstacles faced by Ahmadis when professing their faith.

Pakistani court acquits 20 in case of Christians burned alive

Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (24.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2pEUAOr> - A Pakistani court has acquitted 20 people of charges that they were part of a lynch mob who burned alive a Christian couple that had been falsely accused of blasphemy in 2014.

Brick-factory workers Shahzad Masih, 26, and Shama Shahzad, 24, were burned alive in an industrial kiln by a mob that had been incited by accusations the couple desecrated the Koran near the town of Kot Radha Kishan in Punjab by throwing away pages of the Islamic holy book along with the trash.

After the attack, it emerged that the couple had been falsely accused.

Police arrested scores of villagers in the case.

An antiterrorism court in Lahore in November 2016 sentenced five men to death and 10 others were given varying jail terms for playing a supportive role in the killings.

That court also acquitted 93 suspects in the case in 2016.

Prosecutor Abdur Rauf says the court on March 24 acquitted 20 other suspects who had been indicted in the case at a later stage.

The killings triggered international criticism of Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which were introduced in the 1980s.

Blasphemy is a sensitive issue in Pakistan and a mere allegation can often prompt mob violence.

The U.S. State Department has said Pakistan's blasphemy laws are often used as justification for mob justice.

Pakistan Christian escapes death for 'clearly fabricated' blasphemy

By Asif Aqeel (22.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2pzRgnN> - A Pakistani Christian sentenced to death for blasphemy nearly two years ago has been acquitted.

The case against him – brought by a police officer whose protection he sought against two blackmailers – was “clearly fabricated”, his lawyer said after the 13 March acquittal.

Anjum Sandhu, from the north-eastern city of Gujranwala in the Punjab Province, went to the police in May 2015 to report that Javed Naz and Jafar Ali had extorted 20,000 rupees (\$200) from him and were demanding a further 50,000 rupees (\$500).

The two men were arrested, but they told the police that Sandhu, during a discussion at his school, had “used blasphemous words” and that they had a recording of him doing so.

Napoleon Qayyum, a human rights activist and relative of Sandhu, said at the time that “the blackmailing involved an audio recording of a voice that sounded like Sandhu’s. Naz, with the help of his friend, Ali, produced an audio recording with a similar voice to Sandhu’s and threatened him with dire consequences if he did not give them the money they demanded. When they once again demanded money, Sandhu consulted with his friends and lodged a complaint with the police. The police, rather than registering a blackmail case, demanded further money from Sandhu, knowing he was running a chain of schools as a successful business”.

When Sandhu tried to make a First Information Report at the police station, which, under Pakistan’s Criminal Procedure Code, should have been recorded in writing, “the policeman, rather than recording Sandhu’s statement, assumed the role of a complainant himself”, Qayyum said.

The recording was investigated by the Forensic Science Laboratory. Their opinion that it was Sandhu’s voice convinced the judge and Sandhu was found guilty.

Riaz Anjum, one of Sandhu’s defence lawyers at the appeal hearing, told World Watch Monitor that the case was “clearly fabricated”.

“The judges noted that although the investigation was flawed, no evidence was found that could show if Sandhu had any inclination to discuss religion in the first place,” Anjum said.

“It was a case of no evidence,” he added.

The judges who acquitted Sandhu, Justices Sayyed Mazahar Ali Hussain Naqvi and Mushtaq Ahmad, said that, to ensure a fair, transparent and unbiased investigation, “no renowned religious scholar from the area, who would have a broad knowledge of Islam, was associated with the case”.

Their judgement notes also said: “The forensic laboratory in Lahore had no voice recognition facility... In the absence of a voice comparison report it cannot be said with certainty that the speech in question was actually made by Anjum Naz Sindhu.”

Sandhu is one of three directors of the Science Locus School in Gujranwala. At his sentencing in June 2016, Naz and Ali were also sentenced to death, but only after first serving 35 years in jail. They also received fines of 80,000 rupees (\$800).

Presidential pardon for Asia Bibi unlikely – Case pending before the Supreme Court

At least 1,472 people – both non-Muslims and secular Muslims – have been charged under Pakistan’s controversial blasphemy laws since 1987. Despite international pressure, Pakistani authorities are unwilling to amend or repeal the laws (<http://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-under-pressure-to-repeal-blasphemy-laws/av-43052434>).

Deutsche Welle (06.03.2018) - <http://www.dw.com/en/lawyer-presidential-pardon-for-pakistans-asia-bibi-unlikely/a-42846365> - In an interview, Saif-ul-Malook, the lawyer of

Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death in 2010 for committing blasphemy, says while international support for Bibi is encouraging, she is not hopeful for clemency.



Asia Bibi in Pakistan

Asia Bibi has been [languishing in prison for almost nine years now](#). The 53-year-old mother of five was arrested in June, 2009, after her neighbors complained that she had made derogatory remarks about Islam's prophet, Muhammad. A year later, Bibi was sentenced to death under Pakistan's controversial blasphemy law despite strong opposition from national and international human rights groups.

[Blasphemy laws in Pakistan](#), where 97 percent of the population is Muslim, were introduced by the military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s. But activists say they are often implemented in cases that have little to do with blasphemy and are used to settle petty disputes and personal vendettas. Christians, Hindus and Ahmadis — a minority Islamic sect — are often victimized as a result.

Bibi appealed against her death sentence but her last appearance before Pakistan's Supreme Court in 2016 was adjourned amid Islamist protests.

In 2016, [Bibi's husband Ashiq Masih](#) asked for presidential clemency for his imprisoned wife and wrote to President Mamnoon Hussain, seeking permission to move her to France, where the Council of Paris had unanimously adopted a proposal to award honorary citizenship to Bibi the same year.

But there has been overwhelming opposition to Bibi's release in Pakistan, where the issue is no longer only religious but also highly political. A few months after Bibi's conviction, Salman Taseer, a former governor of the Punjab province, was even [murdered by his bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri](#), because of his efforts to amend the country's blasphemy laws and his support for Bibi.

Still, international pressure for Bibi's release is mounting, which has put Pakistani authorities in a tough spot. Recently, Italian authorities turned Rome's Colosseum red to honor persecuted Christians, including Asia Bibi. Pope Francis also met with Bibi's family and offered his support to the imprisoned Pakistani woman.

According to media reports, Jan Figel, the EU's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, told Pakistani officials that the renewal of their export privileges to Europe was linked to Bibi's release.

Will Pakistani authorities pay heed to the demands of the international community and release Bibi? What could be the political repercussions of such a move?

In an interview with DW, Bibi's lawyer Saif-ul-Malook talks about the current status of Bibi's case, the possibility of a presidential pardon for Bibi, and the sensitivity surrounding the issue of blasphemy in Pakistan.

DW: Would you shed light on the present status of Asia Bibi's case?

Saif-ul-Malook: Bibi's appeal is pending before the Supreme Court of Pakistan. I hope we will get the date for a final hearing soon.

The last time the apex court heard the case was in October 2016. Later, the case could not be taken up as one of the judges recused himself on the ground that he had been dealing with Mumtaz Qadri's case as chief justice of the Islamabad High Court.

But that happened a year-and-a-half ago. Why has the Supreme Court not fixed another date for hearing?

I think it is not a very high priority case for the court. The last time I met the Supreme Court registrar, he told me that over 2,000 appeals against death sentences were pending before the court. But we hope to get a date pretty soon.

Have you faced any threats from extremist groups for taking up Bibi's case? What motivates you to continue your legal fight for her?

No lawyer was willing to prosecute Mumtaz Qadri because they all feared for their lives. But I prosecuted him and finally got him convicted.

Asia Bibi's case was linked to that of Qadri's. I think someone has to take up such cases. Every citizen has the legal right to be defended by a lawyer of his or her own choice.

Does the international support for Bibi work for or against her?

I think it hasn't had any impact on the attitude of the Pakistani government. We must not forget that the Pakistani government is the prosecutor in Bibi's case.

But international support does encourage me and Bibi. You feel strong when your work is appreciated and supported. When I tell Bibi that so many countries want to grant her citizenship, it gives her courage and makes her forget that she has been imprisoned for nine long years.

Is Bibi being treated well in prison?

Yes, I can assure you that she is being treated well. I visit her quite often. She has no complaints against the prison officials, who are all women.

Are Bibi's family and friends also facing threats in Pakistan?

To support someone who is accused of blasphemy is extremely dangerous in Pakistan. It is a very sensitive case. So yes, people close to Bibi are in danger. We pray to God for their safety.

Is there a chance for a presidential pardon for Asia Bibi?

I don't think so. The opposition from a large section of the Pakistani society is so immense that I don't think that Bibi would get a presidential pardon. According to the country's constitution, the president acts on the prime minister's advice, and I don't think any civilian premier in Pakistan can afford to make such a request to the president.

The interview was conducted by Shah Meer Baloch in Islamabad.

Concerning threats to the Ahmadiyya Community

Open letter to Honorable Khawaja Muhammad Asif, Foreign Minister of Pakistan

Dear Mr. Asif,

FOREF (03.02.2018) - <https://foref-europe.org/> - I am writing on behalf of the *Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe*, an independent, secular human rights organization based in Vienna, Austria.

We are deeply concerned about escalating threats to the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan. There can be no doubt that such threats are becoming more serious, making it increasingly dangerous and difficult for members of that community to profess their faith.

Especially over the past year, numerous religious leaders in your country have openly called for violence against Ahmadis, indeed, calling for their murder by decapitation.

Death threats against Ahmadis have become commonplace. These are some of the incidents that have alarmed our organization, and the international community:

- The cleric Khadim Hussain Rizvi has challenged Ahmadis to either recite the Islamic creed (kalima) or risk decapitation.
- Rizvi also happens to be the leader of the political party Tehreek-e-Labaik Ya Rasool Allah Pakistan (TLP). In November 2017, the TLP spearheaded three weeks of protests in Islamabad. TLP members opposed a suggestion to introduce a minor change to the oath required by election candidates. On November 26, the federal law minister, who oversaw the change, resigned due to the TLP's protests. The reformulation of the oath, which would have slightly altered the language of the Islamic creed, was thought to have possibly benefited the ostracized Ahmadis because the 2nd constitutional amendment of 1974, which declares Ahmadis to be non-Muslim, would have been circumvented.
- There are also indications that the Pakistani military has collaborated with the leaders of the TLP. This development has raised questions over the army's increasing role in influencing politics in Pakistan by siding with hate preaching mullahs.
- The above mentioned November protests were reportedly marked by violence resulting in the loss of at least six lives and 200 persons injured. Policemen asked by the Islamabad high court to clear the protests were kicked, beaten and tear-gassed by activists whereas the army-dominated paramilitary force, known as Rangers, stood on the sidelines as passive spectators.
- Other Islamist groups such as the Ahl-Hadith, Deobandi and the Barelvi are aligned with permanent institutions of the state, aiming at a gradual implementation of sharia law. These groups advocate the persecution of religious minorities, including Ahmadis.
- In December 2017, a case was registered against six Ahmadis for registering their names on a list of Muslim voters in local elections. The case was registered by the police on the orders of the Lahore High Court.

Incitement to violence is illegal under Pakistani and international law. It is prohibited by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which is legally binding for your government.

And yet, your government has taken no effective action against those making such inflammatory and dangerous statements. As religious extremists find that such statements may be made with impunity, incitement has increased, leading society to the edge of large scale violence against not only the Ahmadiyya community, but against other religious minorities as well.

The international community has been waiting for your government to take action, but the failure to take action leaves the impression of a posture of complicity, as if the escalating threats and violence somehow serve the interests of the government.

Mr. Foreign Minister, no one should ignore or minimize the challenges your government faces in dealing with extremists in your society. But denial and appeasement will only make the problem worse, and will, we fear, place the security of members of religious minorities in even greater doubt.

We thank you for your attention to our concerns, and stand ready to engage in dialogue with your government, and to assist you in complying with international human rights standards and law.

Sincerely,

Dr. Aaron Rhodes

President
