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

By Shafique Khokhar

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mentally disabled Christian accused of blasphemy in Pakistan

Islamic cleric leads mob to attack mentally disabled believer and family

International Christian Concern (13.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Hy8SdO> - International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that Stephen Masih, a 42-year-old mentally disabled Christian, was accused of committing blasphemy against the prophet of Islam. He was accused on March 11, 2019, in Badiana, a neighborhood in the district of Sialkot in Pakistan's Punjab province. Faraz Masih, the victim's nephew and an eyewitness, informed ICC that Masih has been mentally disabled since birth. According to Faraz, the entire neighborhood knows Stephen's mental status and local children often tease and beat him.

Stephen Masih was accused of derogatory remarks against the prophet Muhammad by Hafiz Muhammad Mudasir, a local Muslim. During the incident in question, Stephen was debating with his brother-in-law over fasting and praying during Lent. However, because of his mental state, he became exacerbated and began shouting loudly, attracting attention from the neighbors.

When Mudasir reached Stephen's house, he began beating Stephen, unprovoked. The family members protested against Mudasir's illogical interference into the family's matter. Mudasir, who identifies as a cleric, left Stephen's house in anger, warning that he would teach Stephen a lesson for insulting him. Shortly after, Mudasir returned, leading a mob of angry Muslims.

With direction from Mudasir, the mob began beating Stephen and other family members for the alleged crime of blasphemy. Police have registered a First Information Report (FIR) against Stephen under the country's blasphemy laws, section 295 C of the Pakistan Penal Code. Stephen is currently in police custody.

While speaking with ICC, Ayub Qaiser, Director of FGA Pakistan, said, "It is sad and shocking that blasphemy laws are being misused, even against special persons. The authorities must look into the situation and introduce amendments and special care of the mentally immature people." Qaiser urged for protection for Stephen's family members and a fair trial of the case.
