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## **Suffocation of the Faithful: An APPG report about the Ahmadis in Pakistan**

**The UK All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community launched its report into the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims and other religious communities in Pakistan**

Ahmadiyyah Muslim Community UK (21.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3fNF3mE> - The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community launched its first report, titled 'Suffocation of the Faithful: The Persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan and The Rise of International Extremism,' providing a detailed and bleak account of the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan as well as across the world.

The report notes that the anti-Ahmadi laws enshrined in the Pakistani constitution and its Penal Code are hard evidence of state-sponsored persecution against Ahmadi Muslims. Ahmadi Muslims are relentlessly harassed, denied civil rights and murdered on grounds of faith.

Ahmadis are prevented from exercising their human rights due to article 260 of the constitution following the 1974 Second Constitutional Amendment which legally defined Ahmadis as non-Muslims. This was compounded in 1984 with Ordinance XX amending the criminal laws to target Ahmadi Muslims, making it illegal for Ahmadi Muslims to practice their Islamic faith.

A disproportionate number of blasphemy cases are filed against Ahmadi Muslims, the report finds. For example, in 2017 three Ahmadi Muslim men, Mubasher Ahmad, Ghulam Ahmed and Ehsan Ahmed were sentenced to death for blasphemy on the grounds that they took down posters promoting anti-Ahmadi hatred in Bhoiwal, near Lahore. Last month Ramzan Bibi, an Ahmadi Muslim lady was arrested under alleged blasphemy charges and is currently in jail.

His Holiness Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, the worldwide head of Ahmadiyya Muslim Community stated in his message for report's launch that:

"Despite the persecution we face in Pakistan and the myriad of restrictions placed upon us, Ahmadi Muslims continue to serve their nation with a spirit of love, selflessness and devotion, as loyalty to one's nation is an inherent part of Islamic faith."

The APPG report also raises concerns regarding the targeting of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in the United Kingdom as a result of hate and prejudice that is spread, particularly online, from Pakistan. The murder of Ahmadi Muslim Asad Shah in Glasgow in 2016 is one example.

The launch was attended by over 700 attendees, including NGOs, government officials, diplomats and faith leaders. Speakers included Siobhain McDonagh MP (Chair of the APPG), Jim Shannon MP (Co-Chair of the APPG for Religious Freedom), Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP (former UK Foreign Secretary), Ambassador Sam Brownback (US Ambassador for Religious Freedom), Rt Hon Sir Edward Davey MP (Acting Leader of the LibDems), Shahbaz Taseer, Sara Khan (Commissioner for Countering Extremism), Lord Alton (Chair of the APPG for Pakistan Minorities), Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (UK Minister for South Asia and for Human Rights), Sir Iftikhar Ayaz (Chairman of the International Human Rights Committee), John Pontifex (Aid to the Church in Need), Fiyaz Mughal OBE (Founder of Faith Matters) and Rafiq Hayat (National President of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community UK).

The key recommendations of the report are for the Government of Pakistan to:

- Restore the voting rights of Ahmadi Muslims;
- Remove the publications ban on Ahmadi Muslim literature;
- Release the three Ahmadi Muslims on death row; and
- Repeal the anti-Ahmadi laws and restore freedom of religion for all religious communities in Pakistan.

In addition to pressing Pakistan on the above issues the report's key recommendations to the UK Government are to:

- Ban hate speech online;
- Ban anti-Ahmadi hate preachers from entering the UK;
- Take action on the Ahmadi Muslim refugee crisis and include Ahmadi Muslim refugees as part of its quota for resettling UNHCR refugees.

The full report is available on the APPG's website at [www.APPG-AhmadiyyaMuslim.org.uk](http://www.APPG-AhmadiyyaMuslim.org.uk).

Siobhain McDonagh MP, Chair of the APPG said:

"We publish this report at worrying time for Ahmadi Muslims across the world including in Pakistan. Just last month, dozens of Ahmadi gravestones were demolished by law enforcement personnel in Gujranwala District. Similar incidents have also been reported in other parts of the country.

Ahmadi Muslims face religious apartheid without a shadow of doubt, as they are the only religious community in Pakistan explicitly targeted by the state through its constitution and laws and this must be put to an end immediately.

We urge the government of Pakistan respond our recommendations, particularly to repeal its blasphemy laws and restore the voting rights of community members. We also urge the UK government to do more by allowing further Ahmadi Muslim refugees to resettle in the UK."

The National President of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community UK, Rafiq Hayat, welcomed the APPG's report, saying it was critical and needed in the current climate of extremism. He added:

"We are not against Pakistan and we want the country to prosper and have peace. To this end I welcome this timely and comprehensive report in calling for religious freedom and advocating for mutual respect and peaceful coexistence between all faith communities in Pakistan. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community has faced persecution for decades in Pakistan. Life has become intolerable for Ahmadi Muslims who face the harsh reality of the constant threat from violence and intimidation and this must not be allowed to continue. We want Pakistan to thrive and it can only do so when the human rights of all its citizens are respected and upheld."

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## **Pakistan blasphemy: Gunman shoots accused dead in court**

***A man accused of blasphemy in Pakistan has been shot dead in a courtroom during his trial in the northern city of Peshawar.***

By Secunder Kermani

BBC News (29.07.2020) - <https://bbc.in/2D999UM> - He had been facing charges for allegedly claiming to be a prophet.

Blasphemy is legally punishable by death. No-one has been executed for it by the state but accusations can often lead to violent attacks.

The victim, Tahir Ahmad Naseem, was accused of blasphemy in 2018 by a teenager.

He was killed at a trial hearing on Wednesday morning. Video shared on social media shows his body slumped over the court's seats.

His attacker was arrested at the scene. Another video shows him in handcuffs, shouting angrily that his victim was an "enemy of Islam".

Mr Naseem was first accused of blasphemy by Awais Malik, a madrassa student from Peshawar. Mr Naseem had struck up an online conversation with him whilst living in the United States.

Mr Malik told the BBC he had then met Mr Naseem in a shopping mall in Peshawar to discuss his views on religion, after which he filed a case against him with the police.

He said he had not been present at court, and had no knowledge of the shooting. The suspect arrested for the killing has been named as Khalid. It is not clear how he managed to bring a weapon into the court premises.

Mr Naseem was born into the persecuted Ahmadi sect, according to a spokesman for the community. But he added that he had left the sect and claimed to be a prophet himself.

The community leader suggested Mr Naseem had been mentally ill - he had uploaded videos to YouTube claiming to be a messiah.

Human rights groups say Pakistan's hardline blasphemy laws disproportionately target minority communities and encourage vigilante attacks. Dozens of people accused of being blasphemers have been killed by angry mobs or militants in recent years.

In an unrelated development, a hashtag campaign accusing a user of committing blasphemy has been trending on Twitter in the country.

But other users, concerned about the individual's safety, have been actively trying to drown out the accusations, using a separate hashtag -#btsarmypakistan - a reference to fans of the extremely popular Korean pop group BTS.

One of those involved in the counter-trend told the BBC it was an attempt to "resist right-wing trolls taking over the internet and possibly killing someone in the process".

Hashtags related to BTS were also used during recent Black Lives Matter protests in the US to drown out racist online counter-campaigns.

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## **New assaults on Ahmadi Muslims in Bangladesh and Pakistan**

BY FOREF EUROPE, AARON RHODES



**FOREF (18.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2ZHhDLd> - The Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe (FOREF) appeals to the governments and civil societies of Bangladesh and Pakistan to protect members of the Ahmadi Muslim communities in both countries from crimes perpetrated against them, and to take steps to promote religious tolerance.**

FOREF is deeply concerned by two recent incidents reported by the International Human Rights Committee (IHRC), which monitors religious freedom issues particularly as they affect Ahmadi Muslims.

The IHRC reports that in the Brahmanbaria District of **Bangladesh**, the body of a baby girl born to an Ahmadi family, who had died on 9 July at the age of three days, was removed from her grave a few hours after burial in the local government cemetery and dumped on a street. According to the IHRC, the act was committed by a crowd that had been incited by Muslim clerics claiming that Ahmadis should not be allowed burial in the cemetery, despite the fact that it has long been used by Muslims of different sects. Local police were aware of the incident but took no action against the perpetrators. The family of the deceased infant was forced to take the body away, and find an alternative burial site.



*'Wall of martyrs' shows Pakistani Ahmadis who were killed for practising their faith [Asad Hashim/Al Jazeera]*

In **Pakistan**, in Chak No. 79 of Sheikhpura District, vandals destroyed plaques on numerous Ahmadi graves during the last week of June 2020.

According to the IHRC, when the incident was reported to local police authorities, no action was taken. Instead of identifying and prosecuting the perpetrators of these crimes, the authorities advised the Ahmadi community to seek another place for burial of their dead.

Both of these incidents show the depth of religious bigotry and hatred suffered by Ahmadi Muslims, a problem that appears to be worsening not only in the aforementioned countries, but in others as well. We ask political and religious leaders to forcefully speak out against such acts, which reflect intolerance that has often lead to murders, torture, and discrimination.

## Living on the edge, Pakistani Hindus still feel safer in India

By Anushree Fadnavis

Reuters (17.06.2020) - <https://reut.rs/37RVNXz> - Seven years ago, Dharamveer Solanki, a Hindu, left his home in Pakistan's Hyderabad city, never to return. When his train crossed the border into India, Solanki said he felt happier than ever before.

"It felt as though I had been reborn," he said, sitting inside a bustling refugee colony on the outskirts of New Delhi, where he and hundreds of other Hindus who fled Muslim-majority Pakistan have built a new home.

(Click on [reut.rs/3ddjECt](https://reut.rs/3ddjECt) to see a picture package on Hindu refugees from Pakistan in Delhi)

Asylum-seekers like Solanki are the main beneficiaries of a law that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government introduced late last year, laying out a path to citizenship for people from six religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who arrived in India before 2015.

The law excluded Muslims from the list, and that determination of rights to citizenship based on religion triggered protests across India that resulted in a fierce police crackdown and deadly violence. Critics say the law discriminates against Muslims and undermines India's secular constitution.

But for the Hindus of Pakistan, Modi's long-held commitment to providing them refuge has drawn more and more across the border even before the new law was enacted.

In the 15 months through March 2019 India's home ministry dealt with 16,121 applications from Pakistani nationals for long-term visas. In preceding years, the number of visas granted rose from hundreds to thousands.

The flow of migrants has stopped temporarily as borders have been sealed to control the spread of the coronavirus.

But many remain desperate to cross, Solanki said. They often come on 25-day pilgrimage visas and stay on until they get citizenship.

Solanki is still waiting for India to grant him citizenship, as the process has now been delayed by the coronavirus outbreak in the country. He was unaware that there was a World Refugee Day, but when told by Reuters that it would fall on June 20, he was very clear what he would like to see.

"The citizenship law has been passed. Our people should now get land and benefits as citizens," Solanki told Reuters at his home in the Majnu Ka Tilla neighbourhood on Delhi's northern fringe.

The settlement where he lives is a cluster of cement, brick and wood huts, with no electricity or water supply, off a busy road. Around 600 people live there. Many of the young men work as hawkers or, like Solanki, as labourers.

Several said they lived in better conditions in Pakistan, but they felt safer in India.  
Slideshow (29 Images)

A few miles away, across the heavily-polluted Yamuna river, a newer settlement has sprung up in the woods beneath a highway overpass called Signature Bridge.

In July last year, when Reuters began observing this community, there were only a few rickety huts. But now hundreds of people live there.

The huts are built with wood from the surrounding forest. There is no electricity or water supply, and families cook on wood-fired stoves.

"At least here our daughters are safe and we can freely practice our religion," said Nirma Bagri, a 35-year-old woman.

Here, in a country they have mostly known through stories passed down by parents or grand-parents who lived in pre-Partition India, or through Bollywood films, the refugees are slowly trying to assimilate.

A young couple at the settlement was so elated with the law passed in December that they named their daughter born that month "Nagarikta," the Hindi word for "citizenship."

Charitable Hindus often offer donations of food, clothes, solar lamps, and other household items.

During a visit to the settlement in the woods in February, Reuters journalists encountered members of the right-wing Hindu group Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), who said they were organising education classes for the children.

The group has ties to Modi's ruling BJP, have been blamed for violent attacks on minority Muslims, and have a stated aim of turning India into a Hindu supremacist nation.

While confirming they belonged to the VHP, the men declined to give their names. Refugees told Reuters later that the VHP men had told them not to speak to the media.

"We are trying to build a life here," said Solanki. "These people are just helping us."

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## 31 Protestants in prison in Pakistan

HRWF (16.06.2020) - All Protestants who are currently in prison in Pakistan have been victims of the blasphemy laws.

As of 15 June 2020, HRWF documented **31 cases** of Protestants in its FORB Prisoners' Database.<sup>1</sup> In all of these cases, the convicted were found to be guilty of blasphemy. Ten of these individuals were sentenced to death, seven received a life sentence, two were given six years in prison and in eleven cases the sentences were unknown or they were awaiting trial.

It is common for there to be a lengthy delay with trials related to blasphemy as these cases are often moved between judges and lawyers are too afraid to defend the accused. This is unsurprising considering the pressure placed by radical and violent religious groups on judges to convict, as well as the hostile targeting of lawyers and politicians

<sup>1</sup> See HRWF documented cases at <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>

alike.<sup>2</sup> In the past, judges have been attacked for acquitting blasphemy defendants and two politicians who discussed reforming the legislation have been shot dead.

### **Articles of the Penal Code**

Prisoners are typically charged under the blasphemy laws in the Pakistani Penal Code:

**Section 295-A:** 'Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.

Whoever, with malicious and deliberate intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of the citizens of Pakistan, by words, either spoken or written or by visible representations, insults or attempts to insult the religion or religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, or with fine, or with both.'

**Section 295-B:** 'Defiling the Holy Qur'an.

Whoever wilfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Qur'an or of an extract there from or used it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life.' (1990)

**Section 295-C:** 'Use of derogatory remarks in respect of the Holy Prophet.

Whoever, by words either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by imputation, innuendo or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Mohammad (peace upon him) shall be punished by death and shall also be liable to fine.' (1990)

In the last 20 years, Pakistani authorities have not executed individuals sentenced to death on blasphemy charges;<sup>3</sup> instead they are incarcerated indefinitely.

### **International advocacy**

On 19 January 2018, the **European Commission** released a report for the European Parliament and Council regarding *The EU Special Incentive Arrangement for Sustainable Development and Good Governance ('GSP+') assessment of Pakistan covering the period 2016 – 2017*. In this report, the European Commission raised concerns about Pakistan's blasphemy laws being used to persecute individuals on religious grounds several times, and the state of religious freedom in Pakistan more broadly. The European Commission stated that:

Pakistan is requested to follow up on the recommendation to repeal all blasphemy laws or to amend them in compliance with the strict requirements of the Covenant; and to ensure the investigation and prosecution of those involved in incitement of or engagement in violent acts against others based on allegations of blasphemy.<sup>4</sup>

In a resolution dated 15 June 2017 concerning human rights defenders and the death penalty in Pakistan, the **European Parliament** stated that it:

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2018/january/tradoc\\_156544.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2018/january/tradoc_156544.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0268\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0268_EN.html)

Is deeply concerned at the continued use of the 'blasphemy law', and believes this is heightening the climate of religious intolerance; notes the findings of the Supreme Court of Pakistan that individuals accused of 'blasphemy' 'suffer beyond proportion or repair' in the absence of adequate safeguards against misapplication or misuse of such laws; calls, therefore, on the Pakistani Government to repeal Sections 295-A, 295-B and 295-C of the Penal Code, and to put in place effective procedural and institutional safeguards to prevent the misuse of 'blasphemy' charges; calls also on the government to take a stronger position in condemning vigilantism towards alleged 'blasphemers'.<sup>5</sup>

In its 2020 Annual Report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) recommended that the US State Department designate Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for "engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom". Despite being listed as a CPC in 2019, the US State Department waived Pakistan from any sanctions due to "important national interest of the United States". USCIRF recommended that this waiver is rescinded in 2020 in light of the extreme abuses of religious freedom in Pakistan.<sup>6</sup>

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## Appeal in blasphemy case postponed 70 times

By John Pontifex

Independent Catholic News (14.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2AvAHSY> - A lawyer fighting the conviction of a Christian man serving a life sentence for blasphemy in Pakistan says the appeal hearing has been postponed almost 70 times. Nearly 11 years after advocate Khalil Tahir Sandhu submitted the first appeal petition in Lahore High Court challenging the conviction of Imran Masih, the lawyer said the case had passed through the hands of at least 10 justices.

Eyewitnesses claimed that in July 2009 Mr Masih set fire to books containing verses of the Qur'an, while he was clearing out the grocery shop, which he ran at Haq Favid Chowk, Hajveri Town, Faisalabad.

In an interview with Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), Mr Sandhu said that the case against Mr Masih was weakened by "substantial contradictions" in eyewitness statements concerning the date and time of the alleged incident and whether or not they were capable of reading the Arabic script reportedly containing the Quranic text.

Mr Sandhu said high court justices were reluctant to hold appeal hearings, and sometimes feared for their lives, in case of a hostile reaction from Islamist mobs determined to punish those - especially people from religious minorities - accused of blasphemy.

The lawyer said: "I have tried my very best to get justice for Imran and will continue to do so. I remain hopeful that he will be acquitted. In our country, what so often happens is that they first arrest the accused and only later do they check the evidence."

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>

He said accusations of corruption meant that police evidence was not always reliable and that the accusers are often motivated by vendettas and greed. He added: "The parents of Imran died because they were so shocked about what happened to him."

Mr Sandhu said that, after the latest adjournment, Mr Masih's next hearing date at Lahore High Court had been set for 6th July 2020.

The alleged incident involving Mr Masih took place less than a month after that of Christian farm labourer Asia Bibi, also from Punjab Province, who was sentenced to death in 2010 for blasphemy against the Muslim Prophet Mohammad.

By the time the Supreme Court of Pakistan overturned Asia Bibi's conviction in October 2018 it had taken more than nine years to resolve the case.

Pakistan is a priority country for Aid to the Church in Need, which provides legal and paralegal aid for victims of blasphemy and their families, working closely with organisations including the Lahore-based National Commission for Justice and Peace.

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## **Blasphemy victim Asia Bibi's brother-in-law killed in Pakistan's Sheikhpura**

Devdiscourse (26.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2X3zs5C> - Younus, the brother-in-law of Asia Bibi, a [Christian](#) woman convicted of blasphemy by a Pakistani court, was killed in Sheikhpura city of [Punjab](#) province in [Pakistan](#) on Monday. According to the FIR, Younus had gone to his farms on May 24 and did not return home at night. His body with throat slit was traced to the farm the following morning.

It is believed that hailing from the minority [Christian](#) community, Younus was killed in a rivalry. This is not the first time that somebody associated with Asia Bibi has been murdered in cold blood.

In 2011, Salman Taseer, the influential governor of [Punjab](#) was assassinated after he made headlines by appealing for the pardon of Asia Bibi, who had been sentenced to death for allegedly insulting Prophet Muhammad. A month after Taseer was killed, Religious Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, a [Christian](#) who spoke out against the laws, was shot dead in [Islamabad](#), underlining the threat faced by critics of the law.

Asia Bibi is now living in exile after the Supreme Court of [Pakistan](#) acquitted her based on insufficient evidence in October 2018. Recounting the hellish conditions of eight years spent on death row on blasphemy charges but also the pain of exile, Asia Bibi recently broke her silence to give her first personal insight into an ordeal that caused international outrage.

French journalist Anne-Isabelle Tollet, who has co-written a book about her, was once based in the country where she led a support campaign for her. "You already know my story through the media," she said in the book. "But you are far from understanding my daily life in prison or my new life," she said. "I became a prisoner of fanaticism," she said. In prison, "tears were the only companions in the cell".

She described the horrendous conditions in squalid jails in [Pakistan](#) where she was kept chained and jeered at by other detainees. Pakistan's blasphemy laws carry a potential

death sentence for anyone who insults Islam. Critics say they have been used to persecute minority faiths and unfairly target minorities.

Pakistan's Prime Minister [Imran Khan](#) defended the country's strict blasphemy laws during his election campaigns. The status quo is still in place. No government in [Pakistan](#) was ready to make changes to the blasphemy law due to fears of a backlash.

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## Acts of violence against Hindu and Christian minorities

### *Human Rights Without Frontiers urges*

- **the members of the European Parliament, MPs of EU member states, members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords in the UK to file resolutions and ask written/oral parliamentary questions about the persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan**
- **the heads of EU member states and the UK to summon the ambassador of Pakistan**

See pictures and videos on YouTube: <https://bit.ly/3bvsie1>

### *Pakistan murders Hindus yet again: 21 houses with children inside set on fire*

Jammu Kashmir Now (11.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3fQ5GJh> - In an act of utter inhumanity, Pakistan continuing its atrocities on Hindus burnt down 21 houses belonging to Hindus in Sindh of Pakistan. Hindus including children were beaten up and forced to leave their homes, those who were still inside their burning houses are reportedly critical. In another village, the local goons of Pakistan attacked a poor Hindu family and sexually assaulted a woman from the family forcing them to leave their locality.

Pakistan, eager to wipe out Hindu minorities from its country is leaving no stone unturned in torturing Hindus attacking their houses, their women and children.

In a recent barbaric move, about 21 houses of Hindus were set up on fire in villages Tadados, Tharparker, Hala, and Matiari of Sindh province in Pakistan.

According to sources, many people including children have been killed including children while some of them are in a critical condition.



In another attack, a non-Muslim woman was sexually assaulted before her family who too was attacked and forced to leave from their houses. The poor Hindu family was attacked by none other than their Muslim neighbors in Punjab region of Pakistan. The family though survived serious injuries but was utterly humiliated and then pushed to leave the locality.

Hindus are not only being targeted in various villages of Pakistan but are also suffering more due to the COVID-19 outbreak and of being denied of any government aid. The inhumane people are not even sparing the children or the aged people from the Hindu community.

Even though the Hindu minorities have been living in Sindh province of Pakistan from countless years, but they are being continuously attacked and tortured by the Muslim lot of Pakistan along with its government. Although Muslims initially took shelter as refugees in those areas but later invaded the areas to attain full occupancy across the regions.

### ***Church desecrated by group in Pakistan's Punjab***

By Namta Gupta

Pakistan Minorities Teachers' Association (11.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2YTEDGE> - A Church was desecrated by a group planning to grab land belonging to a minuscule Christian community. The attack took place on May 9th 2020 at Hakimpura, Tehseel Ferozewala of District Sheikhpura of Pakistan's Punjab.

Aun Abbas and Ali Dhan, s/o Malik Niaz, are said to be the brains behind the attack and have been eyeing this property for the past 22 years. According to the Pak Christian community, these individuals organized a group of 5-6 other unknown perpetrators with the ill-intention of grabbing this land.

Due to the lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID 19, the Church was shut down, and so the accused group used the absence of congregations to launch an attack.

Pastor Samuel Hadayat, who holds the papers for the Church property, told the assembled Christians how the Holy Cross and the Church property, including its gates, were vandalized.

There is widespread anger within the community due to this latest desecration in Pakistan.

Police, with a view to silence the community, arrested two accomplices, but refrained from pursuing the main accused.

Due to the continuous persecution of minorities in Pakistan, many have been forced to take shelter in India. This has prompted the Indian government to initiate a controversial Citizenship law that aims to provide Citizenship to persecuted minorities like Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Buddhists of troubled states like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

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## **USCIRF troubled with targeting of Hazara Shi'a amid Coronavirus lockdown**

***"We are troubled that government officials in Balochistan are scapegoating the already vulnerable and marginalized Hazara Shi'a community for this public health crisis"***

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (31.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3dPI6wm> - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today expressed its concern over reports of the provincial government of Balochistan, Pakistan targeting Hazara Shi'a for the spread of coronavirus.

*"We are troubled that government officials in Balochistan are scapegoating the already vulnerable and marginalized Hazara Shi'a community for this public health crisis,"* stated USCIRF Commissioner [Anurima Bhargava](#). *"This virus does not recognize religion, ethnicity, or border and should not be used as an excuse to discriminate against a single community."*

In the provincial capital Quetta, the government completely [sealed](#) off two Hazara areas—Hazara Town and Marriabad—as part of a lockdown in the city; [forbade](#) government employees from traveling into Hazara neighborhoods; and reportedly forced Hazara policemen to go on leave under suspicion they are infected by relatives. Social media users have made allusions to coronavirus as the "Shi'a virus," given fears of its spread by pilgrims returning from Iran. This isolation and further stigmatization of the Hazara minority could limit their ability to receive proper medical care as the coronavirus continues to spread within Pakistan and stretch its public health infrastructure.

USCIRF Commissioner [Johnnie Moore](#) added, *"We are gravely concerned about Pakistan's Hazara Shi'a community. We understand the many challenges the Pakistani government, and many other governments around the world, are facing to contain this deadly virus. Yet, we urge the Pakistani leadership to work to protect all its citizens, regardless of religion or belief, and ensure that everyone has equal access to the necessary medical treatment. In fact, governments have a greater obligation to protect the most vulnerable in an emergency like this one."*

In its [2019 Annual Report](#), USCIRF noted the rise in sectarian violence in Pakistan in recent years, and how Hazara Shi'a Muslims have been targeted by extremist groups including the Islamic State, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and the Pakistani Taliban.

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## **Hindu minor girl renounces Islam, irks Pak mullahs**

Pragativadi (09.02.2020) - <http://bit.ly/39qJCRh> - The Hindu minor girl who was forcefully converted has renounced Islam. This act has irked Pakistani mullahs who demanded death penalty for her.

Reports said the radical Islamists and clerics in the Islamic nation are up in arms against Hindu girl Mehak Kumari for retracting her previous statement that she had accepted Islam of her own free will.

Kumari said she was forced to accept Islam. Her statement has caused widespread furore among the Islamic fanatics.

After the girl renounced Islam, rabid Islamists in Pakistan are demanding death penalty to the minor accusing her of insulting Islam. They have rejected the probe and proceedings of Sessions Court and have already moved to the high court threatening to go to the Shariat Court if the girl is not brought to justice in a manner they want.

One of the clerics told the media that as the girl has renounced Islam they will be acting on the Sharia law in the future.

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## **Shame on Pakistan: Sharia overrules the law**

ACN International (04.02.2020) - <http://bit.ly/31Or0bt> - "Once again justice has been defeated and once again our State has shown itself unable to treat Christians as Pakistani citizens," said a distraught Nagheena Younus, speaking to Aid to the Church in Need-Italy (ACN-Italy) after this morning's hearing (11 am local time) involving her daughter Huma before the Sindh High Court in Karachi.

The two presiding High Court Justices, Muhammad Iqbal Kalhoro and Irshad Ali Shah, ruled that even if Huma were a minor, the marriage between the Christian girl and her kidnapper Abdul Jabbar would still be valid because, under Islamic law (Sharia), once a girl of any age has had her first period, she can marry. Therefore, the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, which was adopted in 2014 but never enforced, is of no consequence. "We hoped that the law could have been applied for the first time in this case," said lawyer Tabassum Yousaf, "but evidently in Pakistan these laws are formulated and approved only to improve the image of the country in front of the international community, ask for development funds and freely trade Pakistani products on the European market."

The parents of the 14-year-old Catholic girl kidnapped on 10 October and, more broadly, the Christian community had high expectations about today's hearing. Huma was due to appear in court in accordance with the request made to the investigating officer Akhtar

Hussain by the High Court justices in the previous hearing on 16 January. When asked about the girl's absence, the latter simply said that the young woman had been summoned per regulation. Since the start of this case, Hussain has maintained an ambiguous attitude, raising strong suspicions of collusion with the kidnapper Jabbar.

Despite this, the justices instructed the policeman to have Huma examined so as to determine her age, which her lawyer Yousaf asked for again this morning. "It is clear that since Hussain has been put in charge there is a high probability that the test results will be falsified," said the lawyer. "But we keep hoping that the girl being underage will be proven so that she could at least be placed in women's shelter, and removed from her rapist."

The next hearing is scheduled for 4 March, but unfortunately, even if it is proven that Huma is a minor, the justices' decision to deem the marriage valid, eliminates any possibility that Jabbar will be punished for the offences of abduction and forced marriage. Aid to the Church in Need-Italy continues to support Huma's family and lawyer.

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## 40 Pakistani Christians freed after almost 5 years in prison on trial for 'terrorism'

By Julia Bicknell

World Watch Monitor (30.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2yImFCg> - Forty Pakistani Christians, who've been on trial for the murder of two men during a violent protest following [Easter suicide attacks on two churches](#) in Youhanabad – a majority-Christian area in Lahore – have been freed by the Lahore Anti-Terrorism Court. Two others, arrested with them, have already died, allegedly due to a lack of access to medical treatment.

The twin [suicide bombings](#), on 15 March 2015, which killed 17 and injured another 80, were claimed by a [splinter group of the Taliban](#), Jamaat-ul-Ahrar. The death toll would have been much higher if church volunteers on 'security duty' had not acted quickly to defend worshippers.

In riots that erupted following the bomb blasts, a mob killed two Muslim men whom they believed had been involved in the attacks. In the end 42 Christians went on trial for their murder, but two died in prison before 2018. The other 40 have been waiting for their appeal to be heard by the Lahore High Court. Meantime, the group have reached a financial settlement with the families of the two men, which under Pakistani law allows for all their acquittal.

The Anti-Terrorism Court announced the verdict on 29 January, acquitting all, including those who had died, after recording the statements of the victims' families, who told the court that they had arrived at an agreement with the suspects and would have no objections over their acquittal.

A local reacted: "As we give thanks as Christians in Pakistan, one cannot get away from the brutal realities of what this means. The journey of physical, emotional and spiritual healing ahead is a long one. Pray for the right people to be positioned alongside them.

"We also reflect on the lives and deaths of the two [who died in prison]. If they had not, the release of the 40 would not have happened. Their deaths acted as catalysts and became an advocacy bridge for pushing for action and justice".

### **Background**

In 2015, the Christians of Yohanabad had been angry in the immediate aftermath of the twin suicide attacks on their churches because in 2014, Pakistan's Supreme Court had ordered the creation of a special police force to protect minority worship places – but this had been later scrapped. Punjab Human Rights and Minority Affairs Minister, Khalil Tahir Sandhu, had [said](#) "there was no need of raising another force for this purpose" because the protection of worship places "was quite satisfactory in the Punjab and reasonable security was being provided".

Napoleon Qayyum, who lived 100 yards from one of the bombed churches, said police were not providing security to the church: "The local police station had been requested to provide a walk-through gate for security, but no such measure was put in place."

A Catholic nun, Sister Arsene, who had reached one church 30 minutes after it had been bombed, tried to explain to the BBC why the subsequent anger had spilled out of control. "We're treated as second class citizens. We'd like the government to give Christians our due place and due right. That's why the angry youths reacted."

At the time, there were conflicting reports about the two men set upon by the angry mob. Some reports said the two carried weapons, other reports said they had been firing them.

The two, who had been arrested and put into a police vehicle, were apparently forced out of the vehicle, beaten up and eventually burned alive on Ferozepur Road. Some social media reported they were suspects thought to have attacked the churches. Other reports said they were, separately, planning to attack another small church in Khaliqnagar, a Christian settlement next to Yahounabad.

However, some days later, they were finally identified as Muhammad Naeem, a local glasscutter, and Babar Nauman, a hosiery worker from Sargodha; it appeared that they had had nothing to do with the church attacks.

News of their murder filled the Pakistani media, somewhat overshadowing the deaths of the 17 Christians and injury to 80 more. As gory images of their lynching ran on TV and more details emerged, for many Pakistanis earlier sympathy with the Christian community slowly turned into animosity. One young Muslim commented on a Facebook post:

"Christians (Chuhras) have set on fire two Muslims today. I am only sad about their death." ("Chuhra" is a pejorative term often used to describe Christians).

### ***Easter 2015 suicide attacks repeated at Easter 2016, but foiled in 2017***

"The Tehrik-e-Taliban Jamaatul Ahrar accepts responsibility for the [2015] attacks on the churches in Lahore," its spokesman Ehsanullah Ehsan later told reporters. "We promise that until an Islamic system is put into place in Pakistan, such attacks will continue. If Pakistan's rulers think they can stop us, they can try."

In March 2016, on Easter Sunday, the Pakistani Christian community experienced the deadliest terror attack in the history of Punjab, Pakistan's most populous, and most Christian, state when the same Jamaat-ul-Ahrar bombed a popular children's park in Lahore as families thronged to enjoy their holiday. At least 76 died, many of them children, with over 300 injured.

(Christians make up just 2 per cent of overwhelmingly Muslim Pakistan. They are somewhat more prevalent in Lahore, which has about 10 million people, about 5 per cent of whom are Christian).

At Easter 2017, Pakistan's security forces said they prevented a "major" terror attack on Christians in Lahore over the same weekend. The police caught the attackers in time, killing one suspect, Ali Tariq, and making two arrests during a Good Friday raid at the Punjab Housing Society in Lahore. Two suicide vests and four grenades were recovered from the scene.

Earlier, police had released a [memo](#) warning the city's residents: "Reliable sources have informed us that two suicide bombers of an unidentified terrorist organisation have entered Lahore with the intention of carrying out attacks in churches or parks on 16/17 April. They have been equipped with suicide jackets and will target areas where the presence of Christians will be high."

One of those arrested was a 20 year old woman, Naureen Leghari, who'd been to join Islamic State group in Syria. The medical student confessed to returning to Lahore with the intention of carrying out a suicide bombing against a church during Easter 2017, according to an interview broadcast on local television.

Police later released her, saying that she had undergone rehabilitation and that IS had deceived her.

### ***Prosecutor offered 40 their freedom if they converted to Islam***

In May 2017, it came to light that the Lahore deputy district public prosecutor Syed Anees Shah had told the 40 Christians that they would be freed [if they converted to Islam](#). He was later found guilty of proselytism and suspended.

Shah was criticised for his alleged comment by Malik Muhammad Ahmed Khan, then-special assistant to the chief minister of Punjab, who said the offer "is not just shameful but a heinous crime ... We are all set to end the extremist mindset and steer the country to a tolerant and moderate society. Therefore, we cannot tolerate anyone in the government machinery with this mindset".

Pakistan's Senate Special Committee on Human Rights said almost two years ago that "terrorism charges against the [Christians] arrested should be dropped and they should be tried in civil courts", as Pakistani newspaper [Dawn reported](#).

At that time (May 2018), then-Senator Farhatullah Babar said: "[Three] years ago, two churches were targeted in Youhanabad, as a result of which [many] Christian citizens died. People in the area conducted protests to condemn the deaths of their fellow citizens – as is their right. These people were charged with terrorism and have been rotting in jail."

In September, 2013, a suicide bomber had blown himself up outside a 130-year-old church in Peshawar after Sunday Mass, killing around 80.

The group's acquittal came on the same day that the [most well-known Pakistani Christian, Asia Bibi](#), published her biography (in French only, 'Enfin Libre' (Free at Long Last), written with French journalist Anne-Isabelle Tollet, author of two previous books with the woman who survived 9 years in prison on false charges of blasphemy.

"You know my story from the media, perhaps you have tried to put yourself in my place to understand what I suffered," Asia Bibi was quoted saying in a press release announcing the new book. "But you are far from understanding my day to day existence in prison, or my new life, and that is why I tell you everything in this book."

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## **Indu girl abducted from wedding venue, converted, married off in Pakistan**

By Yudhvira Rana

TNN (28.01.2020) - <http://bit.ly/2Opj2Qw> - A teenaged Hindu bride from Pakistan's Sindh province was allegedly kidnapped from the venue of her wedding a few days ago, converted and married off to a Muslim man by the time police responded to her parents' complaint and traced her to Karachi.

Ravi Dawani, general secretary of the All Pakistan Hindu Panchayat, told TOI on Monday that it was the third instance in less than two weeks of Hindu girls being targeted, including a 15-year-old from Sindh who was kidnapped on January 15 and converted to Islam.

"The bride from Hala in Matiari district of Sindh was converted to Islam at Banoria in Karachi and married off to one Shahrukh Memon," Dawani said.

He said the Hindu panchayat helped the girl's family approach the police, who sent a team to Karachi to bring her back to Sindh. She was produced in a Hala court on Monday, but it wasn't immediately known whether action had been ordered against those accused of kidnapping her.

In the case of the 15-year-old, a resident of Jacobabad district, a court has directed the police to get an ossification test done to confirm her age.

Dawani said a 25-year-old woman from Kot Gulam Mohammad town of Mirpur Khas district had also been whisked away from her home four days ago and converted to Islam. She is now married to a Muslim man identified as Ghulam Mustafa. "We are still to verify whether the woman got married to Mustafa against her wishes," Dawani said.

National assembly member Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, who is from PM Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and patron of the Pakistan Hindu Council, didn't respond to queries from TOI about the spike in allegedly forced conversion and marriage of Hindu girls. Kheal Das Kohistani of the opposition Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) condemned the incidents, saying forcible conversion and attacks on Hindu shrines had left the minority community scared.

Dawani claimed that unidentified people recently vandalised the Mata Rani temple at Chachro in Tharparkar district of Sindh.

On January 4, a mob had attacked Gurdwara Nankana Sahib in Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak Dev. This followed the kidnapping, conversion and forced marriage of a Sikh preacher's daughter.