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## **Mob led by Islamists demolishes Hindu temple in NW Pakistan**

Associated Press (30.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3njWoaQ> - A mob led by members of Pakistan's radical Islamist party demolished a Hindu temple Wednesday after setting it on fire in a deeply conservative northwestern town, a senior police official said.

The incident in the town of Karak drew condemnation from human rights activists and Pakistan's minister for human rights, Shireen Mazari. Mazari took to Twitter to condemn the burning of the temple and urged law enforcement officials to ensure the arrest of those involved.

District police chief Irfan Ullah said police detained several people over their involvement in the attack on the temple.

Witnesses said the mob, led by activists and local leaders of the radical Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party, attacked the temple after local Hindus received permission from authorities to renovate it.

The incident comes weeks after the government allowed minority Hindus to build a new temple in Islamabad on the recommendation of a council of clerics. Although Muslims and Hindus generally live peacefully together in Pakistan, there have been other attacks on Hindu temples in recent years.

Most of the Pakistan's minority Hindus migrated to India in 1947 when India was divided by Britain's government.

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## **Sticks, stones and knives: Muslims mob attacks Lahore Christians on Christmas day**

*by Shafique Khokhar*

**Some Muslim boys began offending and insulting Christian girls, resulting in a brawl among young people. A crowd of 30-35 Muslims intervened violently, even entering the homes of Christians to beat women and children. In the clashes, seven Christians were wounded, hit by stones; one was wounded with a knife. The police made no arrests.**



*Lahore (AsiaNews) - It was supposed to be a holy day full of joy, but it became one of sorrow and cruelty in Lahore.*

AsiaNews (29.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3mR4Tde> - At the end of the December 25 liturgical service in the Evangelical Church near the Khadim Colony, in the Amarsadhu area, some families with boys and girls were crossing the market, when young Muslims began to offend Christian girls hurling insults and obscene proposals at them.

Some of the Christian kids tried to get them to stop and a fight ensued. At that point, 30-35 Muslim men intervened throwing stones and beating the Christians, trying to damage their homes as well. In the clash, seven Christians were wounded, hit by stones; one was wounded by a knife.

Rasheed Masih, the security guard of the Evangelical Church says that it is the first time that this type of incident has occurred in their area, even if several times there have been fights between young Christians and Muslims. But this time the attack came from a crowd.

Masih says that young Muslims began to call Christian girls, elegantly dressed up, "choorian" and proposed to take them and spend the whole day with them. "Choori" is a very offensive Urdu term that is used for "untouchable" (pariah) scavengers and slaves. Often the term is used in a derogatory way by Muslims to refer to Christians.

The security guard said that out of intolerance, some Muslims even tried to enter the church compound to do damage, but he managed to stop them.

Saleem Iqbal, a human rights activist, recalls that after the clashes, Christians captured two Muslims and handed them over to some policemen, but they released them saying that they must first open an investigation and then arrest them.

Yesterday, Christian lawyer Sharjeel, along with some policemen, went to the home of one of the main suspects in the violence. The Muslim went out in front of his house and told them that it was a Muslim house, with women inside and therefore no one could enter.

Sharjeel pointed out to him that days before, he and other friends of his had entered the home of Christians, where there were women and children and this had not stopped them, on the contrary they began to beat innocent people.

Until now, the police has not made any arrests.

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## **Christian in Pakistan acquitted of blasphemy after 11 years in prison**

***Catholic prosecuted due to influence of angry Muslim mob.***

Morning Star News (18.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3bkVTeo> - A Christian who spent nearly 11 years in solitary confinement over a false allegation of desecrating the Koran was set to walk free after a high court this week overturned his conviction, sources said.

The Lahore High Court on Tuesday (Dec. 15) ruled that prosecutors failed to prove the case against Imran Ghafoor Masih, a 32-year-old Catholic from Faisalabad sentenced to life in prison on Jan. 11, 2010 and fined more than \$1,000. He was kept in solitary confinement due to threats on his life, as have others accused of blaspheming Islam.

His conviction on charges of desecrating the Koran and thus outraging religious feelings (Section 295-B and 295-A respectively in Pakistan's blasphemy laws) was based on an accusation of a rival shopkeeper and his accomplices, who used a mosque loudspeaker system to incite a mob that beat Masih and also ransacked his shop.

Faryad Ali accused Masih of tearing out pages of the Koran and burning them on July 1, 2009. Masih claimed that the papers he burned were a heap of old merchandise records he had gathered while cleaning his store, Masih's lawyer, Khalil Tahir Sandhu, told Morning Star News. He added that Ali fabricated the blasphemy case against Masih at the behest of another shopkeeper, Haji Liaqat, who sought to seize the Christian's rented shop.

"Upon examining the evidence against Masih, the court observed that the ashes of the burnt pages were not of the Koran but of some newspapers and poetry books," Sandhu said. "It was evident that the police had registered the case against Masih under pressure from the mob and did not even conduct proper investigation of the recovered evidence."

Sandhu, also an opposition lawmaker in the Punjab Assembly, lamented that an innocent man remained in solitary confinement while his appeal passed through the offices of at least 10 high court judges in 11 years, with hearings postponed more than 70 times.

"I'm grateful to the court for ordering Masih's release on merit, but who will compensate him for the years he spent in jail?" Sandhu said. "His parents passed away during his incarceration. Both times I took the bodies to the Faisalabad Central Jail so that Masih could take a last look at his parents before their burial. The poor man could not even attend their last rites."

The attorney said a bill had been submitted in the Punjab Assembly last week calling for amendments to Pakistan's widely condemned blasphemy laws.

"It is crucial to stop the misuse of this law," Sandhu said. "Masih is not the only person who has languished in jail for years for a crime he never committed. This miscarriage of justice has to end, and the only way to curb this trend of falsely accusing people of blasphemy is to ensure punishment for the accusers and those who testify in their favor."

Sandhu said that Masih would be released from prison in the next couple of days, "but the world will never be the same for him."

"He has lost his parents, his business as well as his security," he said. "Even though he has been acquitted of the false charge, he won't be able to live in the same neighborhood or city."

### ***Prior acquittal of Christian***

On Oct. 5, the Lahore High Court acquitted another Catholic sentenced to death on blasphemy charges six years ago after defense attorneys proved the case against his client showed mala fide by the complainant.

Sawan Masih, a 40-year-old father of three, was handed the death sentence in March 2014 after a Muslim friend accused him of blaspheming against Islam's prophet. The false accusation resulted in the burning down of more than 150 homes, shops and church buildings in Lahore's impoverished, predominantly Christian Joseph Colony in March 2013.

In Pakistan, false accusations of blasphemy are common and often motivated by personal vendettas or religious hatred. Accusations are highly inflammatory and have the potential to spark mob lynchings, vigilante murders and mass protests. There are 24 Christians imprisoned on blasphemy charges in Pakistan, according to rights activists.

Although successive governments have acknowledged that the blasphemy laws are blatantly misused, little effort has been made to stop the abuses.

Prime Minister Imran Khan's Special Representative for Religious Harmony, Allama Tahir Mehmood Ashrafi, acknowledged the misuse of the blasphemy laws but claimed that the government had succeeded in bringing down the number of cases in the last two years.

"We accept that Section 295-C has been misused in the past, but the trend has decreased 90 percent under the present government," Ashrafi told Morning Star News.

The Muttahida Ulema Board, a government body tasked with monitoring religious harmony, in November saved six Christian sanitary workers from a blasphemy case after a Muslim filmed them collecting garbage that included a plastic notice emblazoned with a photo of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, Ashrafi said.

"An application was submitted to the police for registering a blasphemy case against the Christians, and they were taken into custody, but when the matter was brought to our knowledge we immediately intervened in the issue," he said. "After viewing the video, it was clear that the illiterate sanitary workers had no clue that the panaflexes [plastic notices] they had put in the garbage skip depicted a holy picture, therefore we told the police to free them."

At the same time, the board rebuked the complainant for filming the incident instead of saving the material with the Islamic image on it, Ashrafi said. He added that he was a proponent of punishing those who falsely accuse others of blasphemy.

On Dec. 7, the U.S. State Department re-designated Pakistan among nine other "Countries of Particular Concern" for severe violations of religious freedom. Previously Pakistan had been added to the list on Nov. 28, 2018.

The other countries on the list are Burma, China, North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Sudan and Uzbekistan were removed from the department's Special Watch List due to improvements in their religious rights records.

Pakistan ranked fifth on Christian support organization Open Doors 2020 World Watch list of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

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## **Pakistani court acquits Christian imprisoned for blasphemy**

By Ken Camp

Baptist standard (16.12.2020) - <https://cutt.ly/2hMdusj> A court in Pakistan acquitted a Christian who was serving a life sentence in prison under that nation's blasphemy laws. [International Christian Concern](#), a human rights watchdog organization that focuses particularly on religious persecution, reported the Lahore High Court on Dec. 15 acquitted Imran Ghafur Masih after spending more than a decade in prison for allegedly burning the Quran.

Masih's acquittal came as a surprise to his family, who moved into hiding after the court's decision was announced to avoid retribution by Islamist extremists.

"It is a day of resurrection for us," his brother Naveed Masih told International Christian Concern. "God has heard our cry, and we are very thankful to him. It's a Christmas gift for us."

The incident that prompted Masih's imprisonment occurred in July 2009. He was cleaning out his family's bookstore and burning trash, including some old books and papers, when he discovered a textbook with Arabic writing.

Masih asserted he asked his Muslim neighbor, Hajji Liaquat Ali, if the book contained religious writings and received assurance it was fine to burn it with the trash. However, Ali later recovered the partially burned book and used it as evidence to accuse Masih of burning a Quran. Masih's family alleged Ali wanted the storefront leased to the family's bookstore to expand his own business next door.

Ali reportedly repeated his accusations throughout the local Muslim community, and mosques announced over their public address systems that a Christian had burned the Quran. A mob of 400 people gathered at Masih's home, beat him and other members of his family, and then doused them with paraffin in an attempt to burn them alive, according to a report on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom [website](#).

After local law enforcement intervened and took Masih into custody, about 1,000 people gathered outside the police station, demanding that he be handed to them. Police registered a blasphemy charge against Masih and distributed copies of the charge among the assembled crowd. The Session Court of Faisalabad on Jan. 11, 2010, sentenced Masih to life in prison.

Blasphemy laws violate 'a fundamental human right'

Masih's acquittal occurred eight days after the U.S. House of Representatives voted 386-3 to pass a [bipartisan resolution](#) calling for the global repeal of blasphemy, heresy and apostasy laws.

## **UK Prime Minister urged to grant asylum to Pakistani Christian teen**

International Christian Concern (23.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/39qvhdK> - The UK's Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has been urged to offer asylum to Maira Shahbaz, a 14-year-old Pakistani Christian girl who was abducted, forcefully married, and forcefully converted to Islam earlier this year. According to Aid to the Church in Need, Shahbaz remains under threat months after she escaped her abductor and returned to her family.

On April 28, 2020, Shahbaz was abducted at gunpoint by Mohamad Nakash Tariq, a 45-year-old man, and two accomplices while walking home in Madina Town, near Faisalabad. According to witnesses, the abductors forced Shahbaz into a car and fired gunshots in the air as they fled the scene.

Aid to the Church in Need reports Shahbaz told police she was drugged, raped, and forced to sign blank papers that were later used by Nakash as a marriage certificate and a conversion certificate. Shahbaz also claimed that Nakash filmed her being raped and threatened to release the video online if she resisted.

In August, Shahbaz escaped Nakash's custody and fled into hiding with her parents. Her escape took place five days after the Lahore High Court validated her marriage to Nakash.

Recently, more than 9,000 people signed a petition asking the Prime Minister to grant Shahbaz and her family asylum in the UK. Supporters claim that Shahbaz faces threats from vigilantes who accuse her of committing apostasy for breaking off the marriage with Nakash.

In a statement, Shahbaz appealed directly to Prime Minister Johnson. "I am very much scared due to the threats to my life and my family," Shahbaz said in the statement. "Please protect me."

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## **Ahmadi doctor shot dead in Pakistan over 'religious differences'**

World News Network (21.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/39fkbp2> - A doctor, belonging to Ahmadi community, was shot dead on Friday, while his father and two uncles suffered injuries when a teenage boy opened fire on them in Punjab's Nankana Sahib.

The family was offering prayers when they heard a knock on their door. As Dr Tahir Mahmood (31) opened the door, the teenage boy, carrying a pistol, shot him, reported.

According to police, the victim suffered bullet wounds and fell on the ground, while his family members rushed to the door on hearing the gunshots.

Police said the suspect also opened fire on them and injured Dr Mahmood's father, Tariq, and uncles Saeed and Tayyab.

Saddar Sanghla Station House Officer (SHO) Muhammad Shamsair said the suspect has been taken into custody who "confessed to having attacked the family over religious differences".

"An investigation team has been constituted that will also check whether the suspect had attacked the house on his own or following somebody's instructions," Shamshair said.

Saleemuddin, an Ahmadi community's spokesperson, confirmed that the incident took place when the members of the family gathered for prayers inside their home.

"Ahmadis are not even safe inside their homes. They cannot perform their religious obligations inside the four walls of their home," he said.

The spokesperson added Ahmadis were being murdered at their doorsteps as the state failed to provide them protection.

"The attack was a direct result of a hate campaign being run unchecked in the country against the community," he said.

Ahmadis, a four million-strong minority group in Pakistan, have been facing death threats, intimidation and a sustained hate campaign for decades.

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## **Ahmadi man, 82, shot dead by gunmen in Pakistan's Peshawar**

***A spokesman for Pakistan's Ahmadi community said he believed Mahmood Khan was killed because of his faith.***

The Times of Ahmad (09.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3pYWU0o> - Gunmen shot and killed an 82-year-old Ahmadi man on the outskirts of Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar, officials said on Monday, the fourth-such alleged targeted killing of a member of the minority group in recent months.

The attackers shot Mahmood Khan on Sunday as he stood at a bus terminal, said Saleem ud Din, a spokesman for Pakistan's minority Ahmadi community.

Ud Din said he believed the gunmen had attacked Khan because of his faith. He demanded that the government must take "decisive action" against perpetrators.

"One after another, Ahmadis are being targeted in Peshawar while the government has repeatedly failed to protect and stop the violence against the members of the Ahmadiyya Community," the spokesman said in a statement sent to Al Jazeera.

Police confirmed the shooting took place but declined to offer any motive.

Last month, a professor from the Ahmadiyya sect was killed by his colleague following arguments on religion.

The Ahmadi faith was established on the Indian subcontinent in the 19th century by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, whose followers believe he was a prophet. Many Muslims claim Ahmadiyya beliefs are heretical to Islam because they believe Muhammad was the last prophet.

Pakistan's parliament classified Ahmadis as non-Muslims in 1974. Ahmadis have repeatedly been attacked by armed groups since the law was passed, drawing condemnation from human right groups.



Scientist Abdus Salam who was also from the community, who shared the 1979 Nobel Prize in Physics, has largely been ignored in Pakistan due to his religious identity.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) in May called the Pakistani government's exclusion of members of the Ahmadiyya religious movement from a commission on safeguarding the rights of minorities "absurd".

"The Ahmadis are among the most persecuted communities in Pakistan and to exclude them from a minority rights commission is absurd," said Brad Adams, Asia director at HRW, a US-based rights group.

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## **Ahmadi professor killed in Peshawar on World Teachers' Day**

***He was hit by five bullets on his way home. Two people are suspected; he had had an argument with them over religion. Attacks against Ahmadis, Pakistan's most discriminated minority, are up. The Ahmadi community calls for justice and protection. Others call for the removal of religious hatred from school textbooks.***

By Shafique Khokhar

AsiaNews (06.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3nuAq6g> - An Ahmadi teacher was murdered yesterday, World Teachers' Day.

Naeemuddin Khattak, 56, a leader in the Awami Workers Party, taught at the State College of Higher Sciences. Around 1.30 pm (local time), as he made his way home, a stranger shot him five times.

Taken to hospital, he died shortly after from his injuries. He leaves a wife, two sons and three daughters. The victim's brother filed a report with the Bhana Mari Police Station. He named one of his brother's friends, a lecturer at the University of Agriculture, Peshawar, and another man as possible suspects.

According to the police report, it appears that the day before his death, the Ahmadi teacher had had a heated argument over religious issues with the two suspects.

Ahmadis are considered heretical by Sunni Muslims, Pakistan's majority religious group. They number around four million out of a population of more than 216 million. According to Human Rights Watch, they are the country's most discriminated minority.

Jamaat Ahmadiyya Pakistan spokesman Saleem Ud Din extended his condolences to the Khattak family; in a tweet, he urged all Pakistanis to pray for the professor's family and for the Ahmadi community, which is increasingly the victim of persecution and violence.

Calling for justice for Khattak, Ud Din urges the authorities to take practical steps to stop the ongoing persecution. He notes that attacks on his people have increased in recent months.

In Peshawar, a real hate campaign was unleashed against Ahmadis, whom the government has failed to protect. On 15 July, with the help of the police, some Ahmadi graves were desecrated in Gujranwala, a village in Pakistan Punjab.

According to Ali Wazir, a Pashtun member of Pakistan's National Assembly, the Ahmadi professor was targeted and killed for religious reasons. "We condemn this barbarism," he said.

Mariyam Kashif Anthony, a Christian social activist and teacher, also turned to the country's leaders, asking them to stop the ongoing wave of religious violence and promote instead peace and harmony among all Pakistanis.

To do this, she suggests including peaceful content in school textbooks and remove any reference to religious hatred.

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## **Christian acquitted of 'blasphemy' after six years on death row**

**Barnabas Fund (06.10.2020) - <https://bit.ly/33BHJRN> - Pakistani Christian Sawan Masih was acquitted of "blasphemy" charges by the High Court in Lahore on 5 October, after enduring more than six years imprisoned on death row.**

His defence lawyer, Tahir Bashir, told the court that the case against the father-of-three was fabricated by his Muslim accuser in March 2013 because of a property dispute in Joseph Colony, the Christian area of Badami Bagh in Lahore where Sawan Masih lived. The accusation triggered riots that left hundreds of Christians homeless.

Christian father-of-three Sawan Masih was aged 26 when he was falsely accused of "blasphemy" in March 2013.

Tahir Bashir highlighted that there was a 34 hour delay between the alleged incident of "blasphemy" and the registration of a First Information Report (FIR) by police. The lawyer pointed out that, although Sawan Masih was accused of making derogatory remarks against Muhammad, under section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal code, no alleged remarks were recorded in the FIR.

Witnesses cross-examined during the court hearing in March 2014 had made contradictory statements and were inconsistent in their evidence, added Tahir Bashir.

Sawan Masih's lawyers from the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS), which provides legal aid to Christians with support from Barnabas Fund, said that they are delighted that after years of "relentless efforts" their "prayers were answered" with his acquittal.

Following the accusation against Sawan Masih, a 3,000-strong Muslim mob attacked Joseph Colony, looting Christian homes and setting them on fire. A total of 178 houses, 75 shops and at least two churches were destroyed. Bibles were also burnt.

At the time of writing, there are believed to be approximately 23 Pakistani Christians (including four minors) in prison accused of "blasphemy"; seven have been sentenced to death. To date no one has been executed under section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal code, which carries a mandatory death penalty.

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## **Press release: Religious persecution and merciless torture of Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan**

International Human Rights Committee (04.10.2020) - On 2nd May 2020, an Ahmadiyya Missionary, Rohan Ahmad, stationed in Rabwah was visiting his parents in Lahore, to celebrate the Eid festival with them. His hopes of a happy reunion with the family turned into a horrible incident. Their home was raided, and he was arrested on the accusation that he possessed Ahmadiyya literature. He was charged under 298-C and 295-B, PPC &

11 of Electronic Crimes Act. Along with him, several other senior officials working at the Ahmadiyya Headquarters in Rabwah were named in the FIR. The Missionary, Rohan Ahmad, remains in jail in Lahore. The Ahmadiyya Community has been trying for his bail without success.

On 29th September 2020, two co-accused of Rohan Ahmad along with two guarantors and one other Ahmadi visited the Federal Investigation Authority, Cybercrime Office in Lahore to try to join the investigation. Unfortunately, instead of listening to their pleas, they were all arrested, all five of them. The FIA acquired physical remand for two of accused, that is, Malik Usman and Hafiz Tariq Shehzad until 05 October 2020. They are accordingly locked up in Cybercrime jail in Gulberg, Lahore.

On 1st October 2020, two officials from Rabwah went to Lahore to visit them in the prison. During the meeting the visitors were told of the physical torture the Ahmadi prisoners were subjected to. The violence and torture on them were witnessed by a staunch opponent of Ahmadis, Mullah Hassan Muavia and several other Mullahs. It was apparent that the whole scheme of arresting Ahmadis and subjecting them to this agonising torment was conjured by the mullahs and their accomplices.

The worst happened, that the two guarantors who went with them were also arrested under the accusation of offering bribe to the Cybercrime officers. However, after a strenuous struggle, they were both released on bail but the case against them still stands.

Mr Zaheer Ahmad, another Ahmadi who was also present there was framed and arrested as well. The clerics took his mobile phone, unlocked it and themselves loaded onto it some books of the Founder of the Ahmadiyya community and the translation of the Holy Quran and produced that as evidence for the arrest of Zaheer Ahmad.

The three of them are still in prison in Lahore and they are denied the basic and fundamental facilities. The Ahmadiyya Community in Lahore is providing them food and beds to sleep.

The persecution, assault and torture of Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan continues unabated. The Government authorities take no notice of it and on the contrary support the clerics in their atrocities against Ahmadis. This has gone on for too long and is still going on. The world Community must take stern action to stop this shocking, irresponsible behaviour of a Government who are signatories to the Human Rights Charter including freedom of religion against a peace loving and peace promoting Community who always remains loyal and faithful to the laws, rules and regulations of the Government in office.

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## **Pakistani Christian sentenced to death for 'blasphemous texts'**

***Asif Pervaiz, 37, who has been in custody since 2013, given death penalty for sending 'blasphemous' text messages.***

By Asad Hashim

Al Jazeera (08.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2Fi6rNf> - A court in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore has sentenced a Christian man to death for having committed "blasphemy", his lawyer says, in the latest case of Pakistan's strict religious laws being applied against minorities.

Asif Pervaiz, 37, has been in custody since 2013 when he was accused of having sent "blasphemous" text messages to a former supervisor at work, lawyer Saif-ul-Malook told Al Jazeera.

The court rejected his testimony wherein he denied the charges and sentenced him to death on Tuesday.

"The complainant was a supervisor in a hosiery factory where Asif was working under him," said Malook.

"He denied the allegations and said that this man was trying to get him to convert to Islam."

Speaking in his own defence in court earlier in the trial, Pervaiz claimed the supervisor confronted him after he quit work at the factory, and when he refused to convert he was accused of having sent blasphemous text messages to the man.

### ***Blasphemy laws***

Muhammad Saeed Khokher, the complainant in the case, denies wanting to convert Parvaiz, according to his lawyer, Ghulam Mustafa Chaudhry.

"He has taken this defence after the fact, because he had no other clear defence," Chaudhry told Al Jazeera. "That's why he accused him of trying to convert him."

Chaudhry said there were other Christian employees at the factory, but none have accused Khokher of proselytising.

Pakistan's strict blasphemy laws prescribe a mandatory death penalty for the crime of insulting Islam's Prophet Muhammad, and strict penalties for other infractions such as insulting Islam, the holy Quran or certain holy people.

There are currently at least 80 people in prison in Pakistan for the crime of "blasphemy", with at least half of them facing life sentences or the death penalty, according to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

Those accused under the laws are mainly Muslim, in a country where 98 percent of the population follows Islam, but the laws disproportionately target members of minorities such as Christians and Hindus.

### ***Aasia Bibi case***

In one of the most high-profile blasphemy cases in the country's history, the Supreme Court ruled in October 2018 that a Christian woman, Aasia Bibi, had been framed in her case and that the laws had inadequate oversight for false accusations.

Those accusations can have deadly consequences. Since 1990, at least 77 people have been killed in connection with blasphemy allegations, according to an Al Jazeera tally.

Those killed have included people accused of blasphemy, their family members, lawyers and judges who have acquitted those accused of the crime. Bibi fled Pakistan in 2019 due to threats against her life.

The latest such murder took place in July when a man accused of blasphemy was shot six times in a courtroom during a hearing in his case.

His murderer was apprehended and was garlanded with roses by far-right supporters during subsequent court appearances.

This month has seen a sharp spike in blasphemy cases being registered in Pakistan, particularly in the most populous province of Punjab. Many of these cases have targeted the country's sizeable Shia Muslim minority, which forms roughly 15 percent of the population.

Since a series of large-scale sit-in protests on the issue of blasphemy in 2017, political parties have increasingly been including messaging on blasphemy in their platforms.

The Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) political party, formed by firebrand scholar Khadim Hussain Rizvi ahead of the 2018 polls, campaigned on a platform based on defence of the blasphemy laws.

While it won few seats, it garnered the fourth-highest share of the countrywide popular vote by a single party.

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## **Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, another Christian arrested for blasphemy. The 42nd in a month**

***David Masih is accused of ripping pages from the Quran and throwing them down a drain. The crime of blasphemy is punished with life imprisonment and in some cases with the death sentence. The story of Asia Bibi. At least 80 people, of different faiths, are detained on this charge.***

By Shafique Khokhar

AsiaNews (02.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/31UBYhd> - On 30 August a Pakistani Christian was arrested on charges of blasphemy in Nowshera (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). It is the 42nd case of its kind recorded in August in the country, a real record according to the Naya Daur (New Era) website.

David Masih's arrest occurred three days after a video - which went viral - was posted on social media showing pages of the Koran being thrown down a drain. Reported to the police by some Muslim inhabitants of his neighbourhood, he allegedly confessed to having torn the pages "to practice witchcraft".

The Pakistani Penal Code states that "anyone who intentionally defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Quran or an extract from it, or uses it in a derogatory manner or for any illegal purpose, will be punished with life imprisonment". In the case of defamation of the Prophet Muhammad (section 295-C), the death sentence is foreseen.

Since 1987, when Pakistan added sections 295-B and 295-C to the blasphemy law, the number of arrests for this crime has increased. According to the National Commission for Justice and Peace of the Pakistani Bishops' Conference, between 1987 and 2018, 776 Muslims, 505 Ahmadis, 229 Christians and 30 Hindus were accused of blasphemy. A striking case is that of Asia Bibi, a Christian sentenced to death for "insulting the Prophet Mohammed", who remained in prison for nine years before being acquitted of all charges in January 2019.

Shabir Shafqat, head of the Christian National Party says blasphemy remains a highly sensitive issue: accusations of this kind can lead to mass lynchings, violent protests and cases of summary justice. In the case of David Masih, he argues that officials must

examine the psychological condition of the accused and organize security so that no incidents occur.

Last June, the Christian National Party staged a protest outside the Karachi Press Club for the release of 24 prisoners accused of blasphemy, held in Punjab prisons. According to Naya Daur, 80 people of different faiths are in Pakistani prisons under this charge: 50% are sentenced to death or life in prison; the rest are awaiting a final verdict from the judges.

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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."

## **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.

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## **Protect religious freedom for Hindus**

Amnesty (07.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2ER2AX5> - Pakistan's authorities must protect the right to freedom of religion and belief for the country's beleaguered Hindu community, including the construction of temples to exercise that right, Amnesty International said today.

The human rights organization's call came as authorities in Islamabad capitulated to pressure from a discriminatory campaign mounted by politicians, media outlets and clerics to halt the construction of a rare temple in the Pakistani capital. The boundary wall of the site where the temple is supposed to be constructed has also been torn down by a mob.

"The respect for the right to freedom of religion was promised to Pakistan's Hindus by the country's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Those who deny a long-marginalized community the right to practise their faith freely not only betray his legacy, but also violate the human rights of religious minorities protected under Pakistan's constitution and its international human rights obligations," said Omar Waraich, Head of South Asia at Amnesty International.

"Pakistan claimed positive global attention last year when it opened the Sikh temple at Kartarpur to pilgrims from India. By caving into hateful pressure, it now threatens to

reverse that achievement and deepen the discrimination that Pakistan's Hindu community faces."

The destruction of the Hindu temple site is yet another example of persistent discrimination faced by the Hindu community in Pakistan. In recent years, they have faced increasing marginalization, with individuals facing false accusations of "blasphemy" – a crime that carries a mandatory death penalty in Pakistan – attacks on temples and shops, and the horrific abduction, forced conversion and forced marriage of hundreds of young Hindu women.

In 2019, in two separate incidents, mobs attacked Hindu properties and places of worship in the southern Sindh province after allegations of "blasphemy" were made against a Hindu school principal and a Hindu veterinarian.

***"Every reported act of violence against minorities must be promptly investigated and those responsible must be brought to justice." Omar Waraich***

"The Pakistani authorities must clearly and publicly condemn such acts instead of giving into them. Every reported act of violence against minorities must be promptly investigated and those responsible must be brought to justice. A recurrence can only be prevented if adequate measures are taken," said Omar Waraich.

In Pakistan, "blasphemy" allegations are often made on the basis of little or no evidence. There is overwhelming evidence that the laws violate human rights and have encouraged people to take the law into their own hands. Once a person is accused, they become ensnared in a system that presumes them guilty and fails to protect them against people willing to use violence.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has made repeated commitments to protect Pakistan's religious minorities. In February 2020, he said: "I want to warn our people that anyone in Pakistan targeting our non-Muslim citizens or their places of worship will be dealt with strictly. Our minorities are equal citizens of the country."

"Prime Minister Imran Khan must lend his commitments some weight to ensure religious freedom for all and to ensure that Pakistan's Hindus and other religious minorities are able to practise their faith freely and without fear," said Omar Waraich.

### **Background**

Hindus constitute Pakistan's largest non-Muslim minority, estimated at between two and four per cent of the population. They include members of parliament, a former chief justice, military officers, and prominent names in the arts.

In a landmark speech on religious freedom, Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah said in August 1947: "You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or any other place of worship in the state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the state."

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## **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 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**

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

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

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:

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

<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)

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."

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."

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

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/3bvsieJ>

### ***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/2YTEDGF> - 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.