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Three sentenced to death for sharing 'blasphemous material' online

Anti-Terrorism Court sentences fourth accused to 10 years imprisonment and Rs. 100,000 fine.

Newsweek (08.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2LAGyLS> - An Anti-Terrorism Court in Islamabad on Friday sentenced three men to death for sharing blasphemous content on social media, while imprisoning a fourth accused in the same case for 10 years.

The court also issued arrest warrants for the four accused, who are currently absconding in the case.

According to the First Information Report filed by the Federal Investigation Agency, accused Rana Nouman Rafaqat and Abdul Waheed operated fake profiles and disseminated blasphemous material on social media, while Nasir Ahmad uploaded blasphemous videos to a Youtube channel. A fourth individual, Professor Anwaar Ahmed, was fined Rs. 100,000 in addition to a 10-year prison term for allegedly voicing blasphemous views during a lecture at the Islamabad Model College where he was an Urdu teacher.

All four men were initially arrested in 2017 in connection with the blasphemy case, which was filed by a Hafiz Ehtasham Ahmed. According to the FIR, "There are several unknown people/groups disseminating/spreading blasphemous material through internet using social media i.e. Facebook, Twitter, websites, etc. through alleged profiles/pages/handles/sites etc... and several others willfully defiled and outraged religious feelings, belief by using derogatory words/remarks/graphic designs/images/sketches/visual representations in respect of the sacred names."

It said that such "illegal activities are causing religious disharmony and unrest among different segments of society, inciting hatred and contempt on religious basis to stir up violence and cause internal disturbance and to create a sense of fear, insecurity in the society, which may not only lead to anarchy but it is also threatening the ideology of Islam, Sunnah and Pakistan." The FIR said the case had been lodged under Sections 295-A, 295-B, 295-C, 298, 298-A, 298-B, and 109 of the Pakistan Penal Code.

The four individuals were indicted by the court on Sept. 12, 2017, when they pleaded not guilty to the charges against them. During the proceedings, the prosecution produced 17 witnesses against the accused. However, the witnesses for the defense were not permitted by the court because they were relatives of the accused.

Human rights groups say Pakistan's blasphemy laws are often used to persecute minorities or settle personal vendettas, noting that they are seen as virtual death sentences as they can lead to lynchings or mob violence. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom cited the blasphemy laws among the reasons it designated Pakistan a country of particular concern for religious freedom in its annual report.

US group appeals for Pakistani woman jailed on blasphemy

By Kathy Gannon

AP News (08.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3bvK3hg> - The U.S. religious watchdog appealed Friday for the rights of a Pakistani woman from the country's minority Ahmadis who has been jailed on blasphemy charges, declaring her a prisoner of conscience and urging Prime Minister Imran Khan's government to immediately set her free.

The statement by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said 55-year-old Ramazan Bibi was jailed last April under Pakistan's draconian blasphemy law that carries the death penalty.

Under the law, anyone accused of insulting Islam can be sentenced to death if found guilty. While authorities have yet to carry out a death sentence for blasphemy, just the accusation of blasphemy can incite mobs in Pakistan.

"The Pakistani government must immediately release Ramzan Bibi, and all others detained for blasphemy," said commission head James W. Carr.

Domestic and international human rights groups say blasphemy allegations have often been used to intimidate religious minorities in Pakistan and to settle personal scores.

"Authorities allowing these laws to be used for personal gain or vendetta are only enabling systematic discrimination based on religious belief," Carr added.

The Ahmadi faith was established on the Indian subcontinent in the 19th century by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, whose followers believe he was the messiah that was promised by the Prophet Muhammad. Pakistan's parliament declared Ahmadis non-Muslims in 1974. Since then, they have repeatedly been targeted by Islamic extremists in the Muslim-majority nation.

Bibi was jailed after a dispute over a donation she tried to make to a non-Ahmadi mosque in her village in Punjab province. The donation was rejected and when she sought an explanation from her non-Ahmadi relatives, a quarrel erupted followed by an assault on Bibi, according to members of her community.

Mainstream Muslim clerics later alleged she was blasphemous and brought out an alleged witness to corroborate their allegations.

"She is facing imprisonment simply because of her Ahmadi faith," said the U.S. commission.

The Pakistani prime minister's special adviser on religious affairs and religious harmony, Maulana Tahir Ashrafi, said he was not aware of the case but would investigate and promised "justice" for the woman.

"No Muslims will be allowed to hurt the sentiments of people belonging to other religions and no non-Muslim should insult Islam," said Ashrafi.

Blasphemy has been a contentious issue in Pakistan. A Punjab governor was killed by his own guard in 2011 after he defended a Christian woman, Aasia Bibi, who was accused of blasphemy. She was acquitted after spending eight years on death row and later left Pakistan for Canada to join her family after receiving threats.

In just the last year, more than 24 Ahmadis, including their senior leadership have been charged with blasphemy and for referring to themselves as Muslims. Scores of Ahmadis are in jail simply for reciting Islamic prayers or greeting others with a traditional Muslim greeting.

Last year, five Ahmadis were killed in targeted killings in Pakistan, according to an Ahmadi official who spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing for his life.

According to a report last month by the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedoms, Pakistan recorded the most cases of blasphemy in the world, even though 84 countries have criminal blasphemy laws.

On Friday, an anti-terrorism court in Islamabad sentenced three people — two Sunni Muslims and an Ahmadi — to death in connection with charges that they shared blasphemous content on social media in 2017. A fourth man, a Shiite Muslim college professor, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for insulting God during a college lecture.

The U.S. commission described the conditions for religious freedoms in Pakistan as continuing to "trend negatively" and urged the government to repeal the blasphemy law.

Pakistan has rejected the commission's assessment.

USCIRF Commissioner James W. Carr adopts Ramzan Bibi in Pakistan through the Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project

USCIRF (07.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/35qDU29> - United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Commissioner James W. Carr today announced his adoption of Ramzan Bibi through the Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project.

On April 30, 2020, Ramzan Bibi, a 55-year-old Ahmadi woman, was detained and accused of making blasphemous remarks during a personal dispute over the return of her charitable donation to a local mosque in Cheleki village in Pakistan's Punjab province. Bibi was charged under Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, an offence that carries the death penalty. She is currently imprisoned at Central Jail Lahore.

"The Pakistani government must immediately release Ramzan Bibi, and all others detained for blasphemy," said Commissioner Carr. "Authorities allowing these laws to be used for personal gain or vendetta are only enabling systematic discrimination based on

religious belief. This is clear in Bibi's case, as she is facing imprisonment simply because of her Ahmadi faith. The Pakistani government needs to repeal blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws and until this is accomplished, enact comprehensive reform."

A village committee formed in Cheleki to investigate the case concluded that there was no evidence to prove the accusations of blasphemy against Bibi. However, hardline Muslim clerics compelled a non-Ahmadi resident of the village, who was not present during the dispute, falsely testify against Bibi resulting in her incarceration.

Bibi's bail application was rejected by the judge on November 18. An appeal has been filed for the mother of six, who has been waiting in jail throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In its 2020 Annual Report, USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Department of State continue to designate Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern, a recommendation USCIRF has made since 2002 due to Pakistan's systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief.

In December 2020, USCIRF published a report on Violating Rights: Enforcing the World's Blasphemy Laws, which examines the enforcement of blasphemy laws worldwide. This report found that the country with the most cases of state enforced blasphemy laws was Pakistan, with 184 cases identified between 2014-2018. In June, USCIRF released a Policy Update on Pakistan that outlines the path for reforming and eventually repealing its blasphemy law.

Wadi-e-Hussain: A graveyard for Pakistan's Shia victims

A graveyard in Pakistani city of Karachi where members of Shia community killed in targeted killings lay buried.

By Syeda Sana Batool

Al Jazeera (06.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/39cVjN6> - Miles from the hustle and bustle of the metropolis of Pakistan's largest city, Karachi, lies the Wadi-e-Hussain graveyard with its hundreds of graves. Each is a window into a life that ended all too abruptly.

Protected from the city by large iron gates and tall walls, there is an uneasy calm within its walls where many of the city's Shia Muslims have been laid to rest.

Pakistan is home to 220 million people, almost all of whom are Muslim. It is also home to one of the largest Shia populations in the world, as an estimated 20 percent of Muslims there are Shia.

At Wadi-e-Hussain red flags are planted by the graves of observant Shia Muslims who have died in targeted killings, gun or bomb attacks.

Since 2001, more than 2,600 Shia Muslims have been killed in violent attacks in the South Asian country, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal research organisation. This year has seen an uptick in targeted killings against Shia accused of blasphemy.

In September, tens of thousands attended a demonstration in Karachi organised by the Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), a Sunni hardline group that is banned under Pakistani law for its ties to the armed Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) group, which has carried out many of the largest bombings and attacks on the community since 1996.

At Wadi-e-Hussain, people paying their respects come and go, as the caretaker customarily sprinkles water on the graves.

"Some bring flowers, some light candles on every Thursday, sometimes a brother or a mother comes with the book of prayer, spends time on the grave," says the caretaker Laal Mohammad.

As the scent of rose petals and incense wafts across the graves this history of violence is writ large across the tombstones. A group of five graves marks a family killed in the Abbas town blast of 2013. A mother's grave sits by her four-year-old's son's, killed in the same blast; the inscription says the woman dropped dead when she saw her young child's lifeless body.

There are more than 300 graves belonging to the those dubbed as "martyrs" in Wadi-e-Hussain. These are their stories.

'My brother did not come back'

A woman sits near a grave, reading verses from a prayer book, crying as she does so.

Tehseen Abidi's younger brother was also killed in the 2013 bombing in Abbas Town, a popular majority-Shia Muslim neighbourhood in Karachi. Kashif Abbas Abidi was at the site of the blast when it went off. Police never found his body.

For 40-year-old Tehseen, Kashif was her whole world. Sitting by his grave, she tells the story of the day she lost her brother in the attack, a sequence of bomb blasts which killed at least 45 people.

"He died in the first blast, he was present at the site of the blast, he promised me that he would come to see me in the evening, my brother did not come back" she says. Abidi owned a general store in the neighbourhood and was at work when the bombs went off.

"It was March 3 and a Sunday," said Tehseen. She only got a few sentences in before she broke down in tears, remembering her "little one".

The government offered financial compensation to the families whose relatives had died that day and in other attacks. But the relatives say the money is of little comfort.

"The government gave 1.5 million rupees [about \$14,300] to his wife, but our loss is so big that nothing can compensate for this loss," said Tehseen.

"Even if our whole life we cry it's not enough. Maybe if we all die crying in this anguish, maybe only then it will be compensated."

'Something died inside me that day'

On June 6, 1963 while preparing for a local ceremony, Ishtiaq Hussain and his fellow mourners heard the news of an attack on the procession in Thehri town, 14 kilometres (8.6 miles) out of Khairpur city in Sindh province. Hussain, now aged 80, is still haunted by his memories of that day.

It was a few days after Ashura, the 10th day of Muharram, the first month in the Islamic calendar. Ashura marks the anniversary of the Karbala mass killing and is commemorated by Shia Muslims in sombre rituals and processions.

"We were around 200 people who ran to save the congregation of Thehri that day," he says. "We didn't know that the news was a trap, and there were thousands of [attackers] waiting for us with axes and swords in their hands, to chop us all into pieces."

Hussain made it out alive but he has no idea how.

"I was among the survivors, but I can't recall how I survived. There were around 10 people who attacked me with the axes, they injured me badly, my neck and shoulder were bleeding, they kicked me in my stomach to the point that I started spitting blood," he says.

"I still survived, but something died inside me that day."

The attack at Thehri was one of the first significant sectarian attacks since Pakistan gained independence from the British in 1947.

More than 118 people were killed on that day. They were to be the first of thousands killed for being Shia.

Silencing the outcry

In August 2020, in the month of Muharram, a fresh wave of sectarian tension rippled across Karachi and the rest of the country. Shia scholars were accused of blasphemy after they gave sermons critical of Islam's early caliphs. Thousands rallied in Karachi under the banner of the ASWJ, calling Pakistan's Shia leaders infidels.

After the protests ended, many Pakistanis denounced the ASWJ supporters' hate speech and said the government had not taken the demonstrators to task.

Journalist Bilal Farooqi was one of the few who spoke out publicly.

A Sunni, Farooqi was arrested in October 2020 on charges of having spread "religious hatred" and "anti-state sentiment". He had tweeted criticisms of the ASWJ march and questioned the authorities over their allowing an organisation that had been designated as "terrorist" to organise the march.

"Most of my posts, on the basis of which [a police case] was filed against me, were about the ASWJ's involvement in anti-Shia activities," said Farooqi. Later released from police custody, he is still facing the same court charges.

He has called on Sunni Muslim activists to speak up against police inaction towards groups involved in Shia Muslim attacks.

Running parallel with the ASWJ's continuing anti-Shia campaign has been the rise of a new far-right religious group in Pakistan, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), which has made the so-called issue of blasphemy a rallying point.

Since 2017, the TLP and its leading scholars have seen a sharp rise in support for the issue and have pressured the government to penalise those accused of blasphemy.

The movement and its leader Khadim Hussain Rizvi were behind days of protests in 2018 over one of Pakistan's most high-profile blasphemy cases. It involved the acquittal of a Christian woman, Asia Bibi on blasphemy charges. The TLP also blocked the main highway leading to the capital Islamabad for weeks in 2017 over a change in an electoral oath. It was deemed by them as blasphemous because it eased some restrictions on

members of the Ahmadi sect, an offshoot of Sunni Islam that believes in a subordinate prophet and has been declared non-Muslim under Pakistani law.

Farooqi says the TLP has also recently hit out at Shia Muslims for what they say is blasphemy against some of Prophet Muhammad's companions.

Regional politics, local violence

Following the Islamic revolution in 1979 in Shia-majority Iran, which shares a border with Pakistan, there was an influx of Iranian and Shia Muslim influence into Pakistan, says Hasan Zafar Naqvi, a popular Pakistani Shia leader.

The real problem, he argues, emerged after the United States and Saudi Arabia – which is Sunni-majority and has long viewed Iran as its regional rival – began to look at Iran's perceived influence in Pakistan as a threat to the region.

Pakistan's ruler at the time, General Zia ul-Haq, had seized power in a military coup in 1977 and was in the process of establishing a more theocratic state. During Haq's time in power until 1988, the role of religion in government affairs grew. It also became the basis for US-backed armed action by the 'mujahideen' in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Backed by Saudi Arabia, Sunni hardline groups began to counter the perceived threat of Shia in the region. To that purpose, a group called Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP, later to become the ASWJ) was formed in 1985 in central Pakistan.

Founded by Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, the party was against the mainly Shia Muslim landlords of the area and sought to exploit sectarian differences. It called for Shia Muslims to be declared non-Muslim under Pakistani law and organised frequent protests to highlight the issue. The rise of the SSP, and its allied LeJ in the 1990s, saw a sharp rise in incidents of violence against Shia Muslims across the country in the decades to follow, says Naqvi, the scholar.

Repeated attacks

In 2009, Syed Liaquat Hussain Zaidi, an influential Shia activist and leader in Karachi was gunned down by LeJ.

Zaidi's murderer was arrested two years later and confessed to police that he was working for the LeJ and had been given a hit-list of influential Shia Muslims in the city to kill, according to Zaidi's family.

Zaidi was actively involved in charity and welfare work and was the president of Pasban-e-Aza, a Shia welfare organisation, said his sister Rehana Zaidi.

On a winter morning in November, Zaidi took his young son to school but never returned, says Rehana.

Two motorcyclists shot him three times in the head as he stopped at a traffic signal in the city. His niece first reached the scene and found her uncle in a pool of blood, the car surrounded by onlookers. No one attempted to help him, she says.

A year after the murder, Zaidi's killers returned – this time shooting Zaidi's nephew, Rameez Hussain, mere blocks away from the family home.

Miraculously, the nephew survived. The murderer, in his confession, told police he had fled the scene having assumed Hussain had been killed. "God saved him," says Rehana.

Pakistani court orders rebuilding of destroyed Hindu temple

AP News (05.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2Xsh5qB> - Pakistan's Supreme Court ordered authorities Tuesday to rebuild a century-old Hindu temple that was vandalized and set on fire by a mob last week, drawing condemnation from the government and leaders of minority Hindus.

The court ruled after authorities said they arrested more than 100 people for attacking the temple and several police officers were fired for neglecting to protect the structure.

The temple's destruction happened Dec. 30 in Karak, a town in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Supporters of Pakistan's radical Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party and residents attacked the building after being incited by a local cleric who was opposed to the temple's planned renovation.

Although Muslims and Hindus generally live peacefully together in Pakistan, there have been other attacks on Hindu temples in recent years. Most of Pakistan's minority Hindus migrated to India in 1947 when India was divided by Britain's government.

Christian lay leader arrested on blasphemy charges in Pakistan

Muslim mob threatens to behead him, burn homes.

Morning Star News (05.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2MPwqbl> - A 25-year-old Christian is in police custody in Lahore, Pakistan after he shared another person's post critical of Islam on his Facebook page, sources said.

Hundreds of Muslims converged on Raja Warris' neighborhood in the Charar area of Lahore on the night of Dec. 26, threatening to behead the outreach lay leader and set fire to homes unless police arrested him, said the Rev. Ayub Gujjar, vice moderator of the Raiwind Diocese of the Church of Pakistan.

"The incident took place after Warris shared a post on Facebook on Dec. 22, which was deemed blasphemous by local Muslims," Gujjar told Morning Star News.

Warris apologized to the Muslims in person, saying he had shared the post for academic understanding between Christians and Muslims and did not mean to offend any Muslims, and the issue appeared to be resolved – temporarily, Gujjar said.

"On Dec. 26, we were informed by our congregation members in Charar that a huge mob had gathered in the locality on the call of a cleric affiliated with the extremist religious-political outfit, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan [TLP], and were demanding the beheading of the catechist," Gujjar said. "Fearing violence, hundreds of Christian residents fled their homes while around 400 anti-riot policemen were deployed in the area to thwart violence."

When Gujjar and other local church elders reached the Defence-A Police Station to meet with the assistant superintendent of police, a large mob gathered outside the premises

and chanted slogans against Christians, he said. Officers insisted that church leaders hand Warris into their custody to cool tempers.

"We sought time for negotiation with the protest leaders, but the police said they could not guarantee the safety of our people if the accused was not presented for arrest," Gujjar said. "We reluctantly agreed to bring Warris but demanded that he be kept at an undisclosed location due to the serious threat to his life."

Police on Dec. 27 registered a First Information Report (No. 1122/20) against Warris under Section 295-A and Section 298-A of Pakistan's blasphemy laws and showed it to the mob leaders, who then called off the siege, Gujjar said.

Section 298-A provides for up to three years in prison for derogatory remarks about a "holy personage," in this case Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, and Section 295-A calls for up to 10 years in prison for "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outreach religious feelings."

Police have relocated Warris, his wife and two children to a safe house for their security, Gujjar said.

Church leaders have engaged with Muslim clergy in attempts to restore calm and extricate Warris from the case, said Bishop of Raiwind Diocese Azad Marshall.

"Warris is an educated youth who loves to serve God," Marshall told Morning Star News. "I was deeply concerned about the situation in Charar, as any wrong action could have resulted in violent riots that could have put the lives of our people at risk. We immediately got in touch with senior government and police officials, which helped in restoring order in the neighborhood, and fortunately no loss of life and property was reported."

Marshall said the incident highlights the need for "responsible use" of social media in Pakistan.

"Christians especially need to be more careful in sharing content, because any faith-based post could be used to instigate violence against the community," he said. "We need to understand that Islamic religious sentiments run high in our country, therefore it's important to carefully analyze the content before posting it online."

Church leaders have sought the intervention of the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Religious Harmony, Allama Tahir Ashrafi. In a country where an increasingly Islamist majority makes free speech and any legitimate critique of religion dangerous, Ashrafi also called for "responsible use" of social media.

"When illiterate persons are accused of blasphemy, we give them the benefit of the doubt, because they have no idea of what they have done, but when some educated person posts something that is religiously offensive, then how can any person justify that action?" Ashrafi told Morning Star News. "Although the post shared by Warris, intentionally or unintentionally, was very offensive, I'd say that the law has still been very lenient on him."

Ashrafi urged church leaders to raise awareness in their congregations about using social media responsibly so that the lives and property of people do not come under threat.

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.

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.

Historical Hindu temple set on fire in northwest Pakistan

The Samadhi of Shri Paramhans Ji Maharaj, the most sacred place for the Advait Mat movement, was destroyed by supporters of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (04.01.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3pTJRfQ> – Advait Mat, or Paramhans Advait Mat, is an important Hindu religious movement functioning as a network of more than 300 ashrams, both in India and internationally. Its most sacred shrine is the Samadhi of Shri Paramhans Ji Maharaj in the village of Teri, in what was once called the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan and now is known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. There, the founder of the tradition, Sri Paramhans Swami Advaitanand Ji Maraji (1846–1919), died on July 9, 1919. He was not cremated, but buried in Teri.

A shrine was erected around his grave, and became a popular pilgrimage site, which was partially demolished after Partition and finally dismantled in 1997. Later, the area was occupied by a local influential Muslim cleric called Mufti Iftikharuddin.

Long legal battles followed, and finally the Supreme Court of Pakistan decided in 2014 that the land belongs to the Hindu community, and the shrine should be rebuilt. The provincial government only erected boundary walls to delimit the area, and carried out some simple additional work to facilitate the access of pilgrims. In 2015, the Supreme Court stated that this was not the reconstruction it had called for, and ordered that a famous architect, Kamil Khan, should be hired for reconstructing the temple.

Thanks to Khan's efforts, a beautiful temple was inaugurated in 2017, but radical Muslims protested that it came to occupy a larger area than the original 1919 construction.

On December 30, a mob of some 1,500 radical Muslims, allegedly members of the radical religious party Jamiat Ulema-e Islam, attacked the temple and set it on fire. 350 of them were identified by the police, and 30 were arrested on December 31.

The attack was condemned by the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, who announced an investigation, and several top Muslim politicians. On January 1, after a formal protest by India, the provincial government stated it will fund the reconstruction of the temple. The leaders of the Hindu minority are, however, skeptical, quoting several precedents, that those responsible for violence against the Hindus will be really brought to justice.
