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Pakistani evangelicals on the Afghan border: "There are converts hiding their identity"

A Christian couple serving among Afghan refugees arriving in Pakistan, explain their difficult situation, especially that of Christians with a Muslim background.

By JONATÁN SORIANO

Evangelical Focus (01.11.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3cTLKbC> - The victory of the **Taliban** in August led to a massive displacement of people in Afghanistan.

Many have chosen to leave the country, but due to the lack of safe ways to do so, **neighbouring Iran and Pakistan have become the main destinations** for the vast majority of Afghan refugees.

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), **up to 2.2 million Afghans are in the territory along the border** the country shares with Iran and Pakistan. This represents 90% of the total number of displaced people.

In Pakistan, the country with which Afghanistan shares a larger proportion of the border, there are two main access routes: one through the Khyber Pass in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region and the other in Balochistan through the Spin Buldak Pass.

“People are crossing through villages and towns. There is no control system. **It’s easy to cross the border.** The Pakistani government has registered some Afghan [refugees](#) with temporary cards that are valid for two years”, a Pakistani Christian couple who serve in a ministry that helps people arriving from Afghanistan, tells Spanish news website *Protestante Digital*.

Despite the easy access, they acknowledge that the Pakistani government is unhappy with the arrival of more displaced people and have said that, while they are willing to help, they are **“not in a position to accept more refugees”**.

“International forces and the UN should take action and help them inside Afghanistan”, stressed Moeed Yusuf, Pakistan's National Security Adviser.

A complex scenario

The situation on Pakistan's border with Afghanistan has become complex, as large groups of people settle in cities like Quetta waiting for a solution or an opportunity to start a new life.

Several ethnic and religious groups coexist in the city, such as the **Baluchi**, who are Sunni Muslims, the **Hazara**, Shia Muslims, and the **Pashtuns**, a Muslim ethnic group.

“All of them are **furiously against each other**. Baluchi and Pashtuns have sectarian violence against each other. Hazara people are settlers from Iran and Afghanistan, and many Afghan refugees have a similar appearance with them, so that they are trying to hide in the Hazara town”, explained the Christian couple.

Furthermore, “the Hazara community, on the basis of brotherhood, has opened their place for them. They keep them in Mosques and Madrasas (seminaries)”.

The trauma of the Afghan conflict has left **“many families broken and scattered**. They miss their loved ones and think of them as they are not aware if they are still alive”, underlined the Christian couple.

Pakistan has **not yet recovered from the effect of the first wave of Covid-19 and has only vaccinated 17.4%** of its population.

Because of the pandemic, “people from evangelical churches had shortage of resources, food and opportunities to work. They have either lost their jobs or are working on a low pay scale”.

Meanwhile, “**churches are open for Sunday services under COVID measures** but the **attendance has dropped**”, they added.

Christians from Muslim backgrounds

The situation is **especially difficult for converts from Muslim backgrounds** who have fled with the population that has crossed the border into Pakistan.

“Many are hiding in mosques. People in Pakistan are surprised because there are Christians among Afghan refugees. They **cannot practise their faith nor go to the church**, because if they do, someone might recognise that they are Afghans and the pastor will get into trouble”, pointed out the Christian couple.

To reach out to Christians from Muslim backgrounds displaced from Afghanistan, the couple is assisted by some Christians based in Quetta who know the language of the different ethnic groups settled there.

“We, with the help of the local Christian community, tried to shift them to rented houses. They are scared of each other and are not aware of other refugees like them. When our on ground Pakistani Christians friends approached Mosques to support these refugees, **few Christian with Muslim background families talked about their conversion** at the beginning”.

They have many testimonies to share, like the story of a young man who was a driver for the US army and “had a boss called John, who invited him to his office and they watched some Christian films together. The boy was interested. He said that in Islam he thought it was Allah who forgave sin, but he realised it was Jesus. He got a Bible in Persian and believed”.

Or the story of a family who “had a baby less than one year. They had no money to buy new nappies and were reusing the old ones, which were giving him a rash. We could not take the child to the doctor, as it is not easy for them to trust new people. They are afraid of being caught and deported from Pakistan if they are seen by the authorities”.

Churches are limited in the country, which is considered one of the most hostile to Christianity by organisations such as Open Doors.

“Providing a shelter openly to converts is like giving an invitation to danger. However, we have lay **leaders in the evangelical church community who are ready to feed them secretly**”, said the Christian couple.

The arrival of cold weather, another inconvenience

Facing the coming winter without basic necessities is now the main challenge for the displaced Afghan community in Pakistan, because “the **government has placed camps** for them, but **facilities have not been provided yet**”.

They need “warm clothes to wear, blankets, mattress, and food” and a better access to rental housing. “**Pray for them to stay firm in their faith** in Jesus Christ and to **find a spiritual fellowship in their own language**”, concluded the Christian couple.

Photo: A busy street in the city of Quetta / Courtesy of the author.

Two more Ahmadis at risk of being deported from Germany to Pakistan

Request to immediately halt the deportation

IHRC/HRWF (18.08.2022) – <https://hrcommittee.org> - The International Human Rights Committee (IHRC) has just been informed that a deportation flight to Pakistan is planned on 6 September on 2022 and that two Ahmadis living in Germany for several years would be among the passengers.

Mr. Tariq Mahmood and Mr. Nadar Rehman were arrested by the German authorities a few days ago due to the rejection of their asylum applications.

- **Mr. Mubarak Ahmad Rahmani** (DOB: 01.01.1972) came to Germany in December 2015.

- **Mr. Abdul Wasay Khan** (DOB: 05.09.1977) came to Germany in January 2014. His asylum case was rejected several times and now his lawyer has filed an urgent application again.

It is well established that members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community face persecution per se in Pakistan and all recent reports indicate that this persecution is intensifying on a daily basis. Returning a member of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community to a country where his life and safety are at serious risk would be a clear breach of Germany's obligations under international human rights law and the Convention against Torture (CAT).

This includes a prohibition on sending anyone to a place where he or she would be at risk of such abuse. The principle of non-refoulement applies to everyone including persons who are excluded from refugee protection.

Under such circumstances deportations by Germany are immensely concerning and we request Germany to immediately halt the deportation of these individuals.

Nasim Malik, IHRC General Secretary, has asked Mr Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, to cancel the deportation of the two Ahmadis in a letter he has copied to

Annalena Baerbock (Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs of Germany)
Nancy Faeser (Interior Minister of Germany)
Michelle Bachelet (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights)
Nazila Ghanea (UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief)

Punjab's ruling party wants to ban Ahmadis from a whole district

Rather than protecting them against mob violence, the Vice President of Punjab's Pakistan Muslim League-Q wants to expel them from Khushab District.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (18.08.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3QzGqZB> - The solution was simple, and one wonders why nobody suggested it before. To stop the violence against the persecuted Ahmadi minority in the District of Khushab, one of the most conservative in Punjab, Pakistan, a leading politician has proposed to expel all the Ahmadis from the district.

It would be hardly believable if the proposal would come from a minor radical, but Malik Ilyas Awan, who put it in writing in a letter to the District Commissioner dated July 30, is the Vice President of Punjab's Muslim League-Q, the ruling party in Punjab. The new Chief Minister of Punjab, Pervaiz Elahi, who assumed office on July 27, is also a member of the Muslim League-Q.

Awan took exception to the fact that public security should be deployed to protect Ahmadis from violence by radical Sunni Muslims in the District of Khushab.

He wrote to the District Commissioner that the Ahmadis "cannot offer prayers openly in the Islamic state of Pakistan... Pakistan is an Islamic state that has been established in the name of Allah and His Beloved." Ahmadis, Awan wrote, "propagate their teachings that is totally against the laws of an Islamic State and the constitution. What will our youngsters who are appointed on their security think? Are they protecting the deniers of Khatm-e-Nabuwwat or expressing devotion to the Holy Prophet (PBUH)? Secondly, it also leaves a bad impression on our children.

It is requested to remove their security immediately and initiate an inquiry. Those who do not believe in Khatm-e-Nabuwwat must be banished from the District."

Khatm-e-Nabuwwat (Finality of Prophethood) is the doctrine that Muhammad is the last in a series of prophets that started with Adam, and that there can be no prophets after Muhammad. The Ahmadiyya Movement was founded within Islam by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908). Conservative Muslims accuse Ahmad of having considered himself a "prophet" who came after Muhammad, thus denying the Finality of Prophethood, although the Ahmadis regard their founder as "both a prophet and a follower of the Prophet [Muhammad]."

Now a prominent politician suggests that those who do not share his theology should be expelled from a whole district—or worse, since "removing the security" of the Ahmadis, as Awan requests, means leaving them undefended against a mob violence that has already killed several of them.

Photo: Malik Ilyas Awan (left) with Punjab Chief Minister Pervaiz Elahi. From Twitter.

Pakistan, USCIRF: “religious liberty from bad to worse”

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom denounces the “dire condition” of religious minorities.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (17.08.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3CfBogv> - It is a bad month of August for Pakistan. As Bitter Winter has reported, the newly elected Chief Minister of Punjab came under heavy international criticism for making the persecution of the Ahmadis in his province even worse. [Accusations of visa trafficking](#) against a senior Pakistani diplomat, former ambassador to Czech Republic Israr Husain, highlighted the presence of human trafficking and corruption at the highest level of the Pakistani bureaucracy. Meanwhile, in the United States, [a detailed report by the USCIRF](#), the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, indicted the government of Pakistan noting that the situation of religious liberty is going from bad to worse.

The report notes that Islam is the state religion in Pakistan. The constitution reserves a small number of seats in the national and some provincial assemblies to religious minorities but, through a perverse mechanism, the Ahmadis, who are part of the most persecuted minority, [in practice are not allowed to vote](#).

The USCIRF report reviews the laws punishing blasphemy with the death penalty. It notes that, “Those accused of blasphemy face violence, imprisonment with limited opportunity for bail, and even the death sentence, although no blasphemy convict has been executed by the state in Pakistan. Even if acquitted by a court of law, the accused and their family are often ostracized or expelled from the community and face continued aggression. Mere allegations of blasphemy are enough to cause riots and the killing of the accused by armed assailants or vigilante groups. Blasphemy laws are also used to fulfill personal vendettas.”

The fact that so far no death sentence for blasphemy has been carried out is balanced by the sad finding that “many of those who are charged or merely accused of blasphemy are killed by vigilante mobs or in targeted killings.” Obtaining justice from the court against those who were part of the lynching mobs is not easy.

The report mentions the case [reported by Bitter Winter in December 2021](#) of a Sri Lankan manager accused of blasphemy and lynched by a mob who burned his body. It also mentions the horrific case that happened in “February 2022, [when] an angry mob stoned to death Muhammad Mushtaq, a mentally ill man accused of burning the Qur’an, in Khanewal District, Punjab Province. Officers at the scene were also injured while trying to take the accused into custody. The mob of some 300 people then hung his body from a tree. Videos shared on social media showed a large crowd gathered at the site.”

Christians, Sikhs, and Ahmadis have also been killed in sectarian hate crimes outside any accusation of blasphemy. The laws prohibiting the Ahmadis to refer to themselves as Muslims are enforced with more and more strictness. The use by the Ahmadis of any symbol that may be constructed as Muslim is enough to arrest them, vandalize their places of worship, and even their graves.

Christians and Hindus report that forced conversions and kidnapping girls from the minority religions who are then “converted” to Islam and married to Muslim men are on the rise. Courts often side with the perpetrators, and claim conversions have been voluntary.

The report also notes the rise of xenophobic and fundamentalist Sunni Muslim political organizations, including [Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan](#), which target Shiite Muslims as heretics.

The report concludes that, notwithstanding Pakistan’s promises to improve its human rights record, the situation of religious liberty, if anything, has deteriorated, and religious minorities remain in a “dire” situation. “The existence and enforcement of blasphemy laws and anti-Ahmadiyya laws facilitate Islamist extremist elements and support their narrative that leaves little space for religious inclusion. Pakistan’s laws further fail to protect religious minorities at increasing risk of abduction, forced marriage, and forced conversion to Islam.” “As the U.S. government continues to engage with Pakistan, the USCIRF notes, it should continue to raise religious freedom concerns and ensure protection of religious communities targeted by Pakistan’s problematic laws and extremist groups.”

Photo: Protests against forced conversions in Pakistan. [Credits](#).

Shiites killed in Gilgit-Baltistan

Violence against Pakistani Shia Muslims during the sacred month of Muharram unfortunately repeats itself every year.

By Marco Respinti

Bitter Winter (08.08.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3AcWg6P> - [Bitter Winter has published series and articles](#) about the persecution of the Shiite minority in Pakistan. The difficult situation of Shia Muslims there is receiving increasing international attention. As for other tragedies, though, the risk is that, when violence becomes routine, a form of “news fatigue” affects international media and incidents are no longer reported.

Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar, and one of the four sacred months for Muslims. The Mourning of Muharram commemorates the killing of Imam Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala in 680, within the context of events that led to the separation between Shiite and Sunni Islam. Although Sunnis also respect the bravery of Husayn, the Mourning of Muharram is primarily a Shiite memory.

Radical Sunni Muslims regard the specific Shiite celebrations at Muharram as anti-Sunni and offensive. In Pakistan where, as frequently explained in Bitter Winter, anti-Shiite feelings are fueled by ultra-fundamentalist Islamic political organizations, this dissent routinely generates deadly violence.

The month of Muharram started on July 31, and unfortunately anti-Shia violence started too. Police is currently investigating an incident that happened near the monument of Yagdar Chowk in Gilgit City, in the autonomous territory of Gilgit-Balistan (former Northern Territories) at the beginning of Muharram.

A local Shiite leader, Agha Rahat Hussain al Hussaini., raised the flag of Imam Husayn. Suddenly, a Sunni mob attacked the Shiites. Two young Shiites were killed, Syed Iqrar Hussain, 25, a resident of Nagaral, and Mohammad Ali, 15, from Hoper valley of Nagar. The Shiites reacted, and the confrontation left 17 injured.

These incidents are unfortunately not isolated. Shiites are both skeptical that the perpetrators will be sentenced for their crimes and persuaded that violence will continue as long as radical Sunni group will be allowed to disseminate anti-Shia hate speech.

Photo: The Two Shiites killed, Mohamad Ali and Syed Iqrar Hussain. From Twitter.

Ashfaq Masih: another Christian sentenced to death for blasphemy in Pakistan

Claiming during a commercial dispute that he “follows only Jesus” and does not give discounts to members of Sufi ascetic orders was enough for getting a capital sentence.

By Daniela Bovolenta

Bitter Winter (11.07.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3IVqfTz> - On July 4, 2022, a Lahore, Pakistan, Session Court sentence to death for blasphemy a Christian called Ashfaq Masih. The decision follows a similar one of June 11, when the High Court confirmed the death penalty in a case concerning two Christian brothers, Amoon and Qaiser Ayub.

Masih' s family has released a statement where the man explains what happened in June 2017, when he was arrested. He has been in jail ever since, except when in November 2019 he was accompanied by the police, handcuffed, to his mother's funeral.

“I am innocent, Masih said, the case against me is baseless, false, and frivolous and framed against me just to destroy my business. My business was running well, and I was very happy but Muhammad Naveed, who is also a motorcycle mechanic and had started a shop in front of me, was jealous because my business was doing well and had a good reputation in the area. We had already fought a few days before the incident. And he had threatened me with dire consequences. On the day of the incident, I had an argument

with Muhammad Irfan, who was refusing to pay me after getting his bicycle repaired. When I asked Irfan to pay the bill we agreed, he responded by saying 'I am a follower of Peer Fakhir (Sufi Muslim ascetics) and don't ask for the bill.' I insisted for my bill and said that I don't follow anyone other than Jesus, and so wasn't interested in the man's religious status."

"Irfan went to Naveed's shop and after a few minutes he came back and turned the whole matter into religious affairs and started accusing me of committing blasphemy. People started gathering around my shop, and the owner [of the premises where I work], Muhammad Ashfaq, who had already asked me to vacate his shop, also arrived. This was an opportunity for Naveed and Ashfaq to settle the score, so they complained to the police and the police registered a first information report (FIR) under blasphemy law section 295 C which has a mandatory death penalty."

The statement "I follow only Jesus" was constructed as "I refuse to follow Prophet Muhammad" and qualified as blasphemy. The Session Court agreed.

The family also said that the judgement was delivered very quickly, and without really listening to the defense. This is the rule in lower courts in Pakistan, where accusations of blasphemy are automatically believed. Masih now places his hopes in the appeal.

Photo: Ashfaq Masih. From Twitter.

Ahmadis once again under attack in Pakistan

A terrorist group publishes images of what looks like a forced conversion, while mosques and graves are desecrated in Punjab.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (13.06.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3xMDy4w> - A visibly terrorized young man sits among bearded Islamic militants. This is an image found only in the so-called deep web, a dangerous place unknown to the mainline search engines and where terrorists and other criminals roam free. We are told that the man is one Chaudhry Zubair, from Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan, and he is renouncing his Ahmadi faith and "converting" to "orthodox Islam" in the hands of some recognizable leaders of the radical Islamic organization Lashkar-e-Taiba, considered a terrorist groups in several countries, officially including Pakistan itself where it is however unofficially tolerated by the authorities.

We have no way of knowing whether the story is true, but the images and comments are inherently violent, another testament of the persecution vested on the Ahmadis of Pakistan.

The Ahmadiyyat is a movement founded within Islam by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908). Conservative Muslims accuse Ahmad of having considered himself a "prophet," whereas Islam teaches that there can be no prophet after Muhammad. The Ahmadi

formula for Ahmad, "at the same time a prophet and a follower of the Holy Prophet [Muhammad]," is not enough to establish orthodoxy in the eyes of Muslim clerics. In Pakistan, laws prevent the Ahmadis from calling themselves "Muslims," and they are [heavily persecuted](#).

Documented attacks occur almost daily. On May 31 and June 1, for example, another incident targeted the Ahmadis in Pind Dadan Khan, a city in the Jhelum district of Punjab. The minarets of the Baitul Hamd Mosque were demolished, and Ahmadi graves were desecrated.

The story started with a complaint lodged by one Naveed Shahzad, a member of the radical Islamic organization Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, to which Bitter Winter has devoted [a 7-article series](#) in 2021. He claimed that the Ahmadi mosque in Pind Dadan Khan had minarets, and thus might be mistaken for a mainline Muslim place of worship. Since the law prohibits Ahmadis from calling themselves Muslims, the complainant believed it also implicitly prohibits their places of worship to have minarets.

The Assistant Commissioner and the Deputy Superintendent of Police of the city agreed with the complainant, and had the minarets destroyed.

A similar accusation, that they had Islamic inscriptions and may mislead cemetery visitors into believing that Muslims are buried there, was raised against Ahmadi graves in Pind Dadan Khan. The authorities had the inscriptions removed too.

Interestingly, both the minarets and the inscriptions had been in Pind Dadan Khan since 1952, and nobody had complained before. It is difficult to avoid the impression that, once again, members of radical Islamic organizations and local police officers cooperated in the harassment of the Ahmadis.

Photo : The "conversion" of an Ahmadi (in grey), as reported by Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Two Sikhs shot dead in Peshawar and an Ahmadi stabbed to death

On May 15, unidentified assailants came on a motorbike and killed two peaceful merchants. On May 17, Ahmadi Abdus Salam was killed in the village called L Plot, in Punjab

By Massimo Introvigne

Two Sikhs shot dead in Peshawar

Bitter Winter (17.05.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3x2JzbZ> - Two Sikh traders, Ranjit Singh (42) and Kuljeet Singh (38), were peacefully sitting in front of their shops in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, on May 15, when two men arrived on a motorbike, opened fire, and killed them.

In September last year, another Sikh shopkeeper had been similarly killed in Peshawar.

In Pakistan, the persecution of the Sikhs starts from statistics. The community reports there can be as many as 50,000 Sikhs in the country. Scholars believe they are around 20,000, but the government maintains they are less than 7,000.

Numbers are dwindling because of a long history of harassment, forced conversion, destruction of places of worship—and homicide.

As usual, Pakistani authorities condemned the double homicide. From Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Mahmood Khan, all offered condolences to the Sikh community and promised justice.

However, rarely is justice delivered in these cases. The root cause of the crimes is the activity of Islamic Sunni extremist organizations that regard the Sikhs as dangerous enemies of Islam and disseminate hate speech.

Until these organizations and their campaigns of hate are not stopped, violence against religious minorities cannot but continue.

Abdus Salam was killed in the village called L Plot, in Punjab

Bitter Winter (19.05.2022) - <https://bit.ly/38cRniQ> - International protests do not seem to have any effect. The [persecution of the Ahmadis](#) in Pakistan continues, at different levels.

The Ahmadis are part of a movement founded within Islam by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908). Conservative Muslims accuse Ahmad of having considered himself a “prophet,” whereas Islam teaches that no prophet can appear after Muhammad. The Ahmadi formula for Ahmad, “at the same time a prophet and a follower of the Holy Prophet [Muhammad],” is not enough to establish the Ahmadis’ orthodoxy in the eyes of Muslim clerics.

This is not a theological dispute only, and the hatred disseminated against the Ahmadis by both Muslim radicals and the Pakistani government itself continues to kill.

On May 17, at 5:45 pm, an Ahmadi called Abdus Salam, son of Munawar Ahmed, left his home in the village called L Plot in the District of Okara, Punjab. A young boy, Ali Raza alias Mulazam Hussain, son of Badhir Ahmer, suddenly attacked him and stabbed him to death.

The young boy is a student at the local madrassa. He had no personal quarrel with Abdus Salam, and the only explanation for the crime is that it was motivated by sectarian hatred against the Ahmadis. The assassin has left the village and, at the time of this writing, is still at large.

Abdus Salam leaves behind a widow, two young boys of 6 and 4, and a baby girl of one and a half year. It is the last victim of a cruel and senseless war.

Photo : Protest march after the homicides in Peshawar. From Twitter.

Hearing of a Christian couple, formerly sentenced to death in Pakistan, at the European Parliament

By Manel Msalmi and Willy Fautré

HRWF (23.05.2022) - On Wednesday 18 May 2022, **Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar**, a Christian couple sentenced to death in Pakistan on blasphemy charges in 2014 and kept on the death row until their acquittal in June 2021, were welcomed with open arms at the European Parliament to testify about their ordeal.

The event was organized by **MEPs Peter van Dalen and Carlo Fidanza, co-chairs of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious tolerance** and attended by other MEPs, such as the Vice President of the European Parliament **Othmar Karas** (EPP Political Group) and **Charlie Weimers** (ECR Political Group).

The conference started with an exchange of views between the Christian couple who after their acquittal was granted asylum in a European country. They said they were grateful to Europe for welcoming their family and guaranteeing their safety and security.

Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar said they were "happy and relieved to be free." They were grateful to the three members of the EP Intergroup on FORB – Peter van Dalen (EPP), Bert-Jan Ruissen (ECR), Joachim Kuhs (ID) - who had filed a written [parliamentary question](#) about their situation on 10 February 2021 which was addressed to Josep Borrell, High Representative/ Vice President of the European Commission.

They also thanked the European Parliament which on 29 April 2021 had adopted a [Resolution on Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan](#), focusing in particular on their personal case saying in its very first point:

"whereas Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, a Christian couple, were imprisoned in 2013 and sentenced to death in 2014 for blasphemy; whereas they have been accused of sending "blasphemous" text messages to a mosque cleric insulting the Prophet Muhammad, using a sim card registered in Shagufta's name; whereas both the accused have consistently denied all allegations and believe that her National Identity Card was purposely misused;

the European Parliament

Strongly condemns the imprisonment and sentencing of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, as well as the continued delay of their appeal hearing;

*calls on the Pakistani authorities to immediately and unconditionally release them, and to provide them and their lawyer adequate security now and upon release;
calls on the Lahore High Court to hold the appeal hearing without delay and to strike down the verdict in accordance with human rights;"*

681 members of the European Parliament voted in favor of the resolution: only three MEPs opposed it.

The pressure exerted by the EU institutions was finally successful as the Christian couple who had spent eight years in prison was released a month and a half later.

The intervention of Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar was followed by their lawyer's, Saif Ul Malook, who shared his views and thoughts regarding blasphemy laws. Saif Ul Malook was also the lawyer of Asia Bibi, arrested in June 2009 and sentenced to death by hanging in 2018. After the visit of Jan Figel, EU Special Representative on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Supreme Court of Pakistan acquitted her based on insufficient evidence. Saif Ul Malook lives under high protection and goes on receiving death threats accusing him to be a "traitor of Islam". He said that he is ready to defend faithful of Christianity and Islam in the same way because in each of these two religions, "God asks to save the innocent and protect life," according to him. "To save a life is to save humanity," he said.

The debate was followed by some reflections on the situation in Pakistan by Jean -Paul Van der Walle from "ADF International" and Jan Dirk Van Nifterik from the Dutch foundation "Hulp Vervolgde Christenen" (Help Persecuted Christians).

Mr Joel Voordewind, a former MP in the Netherlands, argued that the EU should "stand with the minorities who are affected by the blasphemy laws in Pakistan." He added: "We are not talking about numbers but we are dealing with people." Individual cases give a face to the numbers of victims who are killed, beaten and even stoned or burnt to death. The question is "What can we do as politicians to make a change?". The answer is "EU resolutions. They are useful to fight against blasphemy laws and the Human Rights Council in Geneva must support the European Parliament resolutions for freedom of religion and against the death penalty." According to a research by an Australian university on the death penalty, 1600 people have been in jail in Pakistan on the grounds of blasphemy, the majority of them being Muslims. Twelve countries still have death penalties for non-believers on apostasy and blasphemy.

MEP Peter Van Dalen is working on an EU resolution supporting a UN resolution against the death penalty to put pressure on the 12 countries whose laws allow death sentences in cases of change of religion. The resolution will be introduced by the EPP Group. A draft of the EU resolution will be discussed in July 2022 in the plenary session as an emergency.

The lawyer of the Christian Pakistani couple, Mr Malook, stressed that the EU should be firm with the imams coming from Pakistan and vigilant about their teachings.

In their last remarks, the couple and their children said that they are happy and thankful to the EU for welcoming them as they feel that they are free for the first time in their lives.

MEP Peter Van Dalen, as a co-chair of the Intergroup on freedom of religion and belief, regretted in his conclusion that unfortunately left-wing MEPs are reluctant in bringing freedom of religion issues on the agenda and sometimes block EU resolutions introduced by the EPP Group. And he added that the European Parliament wanted the EU to review

Pakistan's eligibility for GSP+ status as long as there is no substantial improvement of its human rights and religious freedom record.

Photo : MEP Peter Van Dalen

Questions from MEP Martusciello about blasphemy laws to EU Commissioner Dombrovskis



*Hearing about blasphemy laws in Pakistan at the European Parliament on 27 April 2022.
Credit: HRWF*

HRWF (02.05.2022) - On April 28th, there was an informal hearing in the European Parliament (EP) to ask what the European Commission has done in response to the [29 April 2021 EP Resolution](#) calling for suspension of Pakistan's GSP+ favoured nation trading status in the light of that country's failure to honour its human rights commitments. That resolution had been adopted by 681 MEPs; only three MEPs had opposed it. It was calling on the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS)

"to immediately review Pakistan's eligibility for GSP+ status in the light of current events and whether there is sufficient reason to initiate a procedure for the temporary withdrawal of this status and the benefits that come with it, and to report to the European Parliament on this matter as soon as possible."

The hearing was hosted by Fulvio Martusciello MEP (EPP group).

The moderator was Willy Fautre, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.

Before the hearing, MEP Martusciello sent EU Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis a number of questions on issues which have been a source of deep concern for a long time for human rights organizations.

Questions addressed to EU Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis

The following questions were forwarded to EU Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis in advance of the event.

In April 2021 the European Parliament called on the European Commission to and the European External Action Service to to immediately review Pakistan's eligibility for its continued GSP+ status in the light of continued human rights abuses in that country, drawing particular attention to the highly controversial 'Blasphemy laws.'

Since April 2021, what concrete steps have the European Commission and the European External Action Service taken to pressure the government of Pakistan to address the human rights issues raised by the European Parliament?

What dialogue has taken place between the European Commission, the European External Action Service, and the government of Pakistan with the view to urging the latter to abolish the blasphemy laws?

What is the current situation concerning Pakistan's GSP+ status?

Will the European Commission and the European External Action Service assure us that these issues will be prioritised with the new Prime Minister of Pakistan, Shehbaz Sharif, and indicate when this will be done?

Civil society organizations are waiting for the Commissioner's response. Hopefully as soon as possible.

In this regard, Manel Msalmi international Affairs Advisor to Mep (EPP Group) and president of the European Association for The Defense of Minorities said "What we expect from the commissioner is to put human rights issues as well as minorities rights on the top of the agenda and urge the government of Pakistan to abolish blasphemy laws. We also would like to learn about the current situation concerning GSP+ status and a guarantee that human rights issues will be prioritized in the dialogue between the EEAS and the new PM of Pakistan Shehbaz Sharif."

And Gary Cartwright from EU Today added: "Pakistan was granted GSP+ status as an incentive to address serious human rights issues. This has not happened and so the status must be suspended. Otherwise, what message is the Commission sending out to other regimes which show little or no regard for human rights."

The blasphemy laws in the dock

During the introduction, the moderator explained why those blasphemy laws were an acute problem for religious minorities in Pakistan and for the international human rights community. He was quoted as saying:

"Blasphemy laws are the single most draconian laws that undermine freedom of thought, religion or expression. It literally suffocates the religious minorities, instills deadly fear of mob violence and forces religious minorities into submission to the whims and authority of the majority.

Government efforts towards Islamization of Pakistan's civil and criminal law, which began in the early 1980s, have dangerously undermined fundamental right to freedom of religion and expression, and have led to serious abuses against the country's religious minorities. The broad and vague provisions of a series of laws known collectively as the "blasphemy" laws, which strengthen criminal penalties for offenses against Islam, have been used to bring politically motivated charges of blasphemy or other religious offenses against members of religious minorities as well as some Muslims.

The blasphemy laws have also contributed to a climate of religious bigotry which has led to discrimination, harassment and violent attacks on minorities - abuses which are apparently tolerated, if not condoned, by some political leaders and government officials.

In its Resolution last year, the European Parliament stressed that

- the blasphemy laws incite harassment, violence and murder against those being accused
- people who are accused of blasphemy have to fear for their lives regardless of the outcome of judicial procedures
- blasphemy laws are often abused by making false accusations that serve the personal interests of the accuser.

Moreover, blasphemy laws make it dangerous for religious minorities to express themselves freely or engage publicly in religious activities.

Any attempt to reform the laws and their application or to discuss these issues in the media have been stifled by threats and assassinations.

According to the Centre for Social Justice in Pakistan, at least 1855 people have been charged under the blasphemy laws between 1987 and February 2021, with the highest number of accusations taking place in 2020.

Our organization, Human Rights Without Frontiers, has a database of 47 documented cases of believers of all faiths in Pakistan who are in jail on the basis of the blasphemy laws. These include 26 Christians, 15 Sunni Muslims, 5 Ahmadis and 1 Shia Muslim. But there are certainly more. Sixteen have been sentenced to death; another 16 have been sentenced life imprisonment, ten have been sentenced to prison for years and in the other cases, the status is not known."

At least 58 killed in suicide bombing at Shi'ite mosque

By [Jibran Ahmad](#)



Reuters (05.03.2022) - <https://reut.rs/3sHIHbF> - A suicide bombing at a Shi'ite Muslim mosque during Friday prayers in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar killed at least 58 people and injured nearly 200, hospital officials said.

Islamic State claimed responsibility for the bombing in a statement, which would make it one of the biggest attacks carried out by the group inside Pakistan.

An armed man who arrived near the mosque on a motorcycle opened fire when he was stopped by police, before forcing his way into a crowded hall and detonating his suicide vest, senior police official Haroon Rasheed said.

The attacker first shot at the police guards at the mosque's entrance, killing one of them, he said. "The armed man entered the mosque and started firing on the worshippers and finally blew himself up," Rasheed added.

Previously, police had said they were two men on the motorcycle.

The attack is one of the deadliest in years on Pakistan's Shi'ite minority, which has long been targeted by Sunni Muslim Islamist militants, including Islamic State and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban.

The Pakistani Taliban distanced themselves from the attack in a message sent to Reuters.

Many of the injured were in critical condition, officials at the nearby Lady Reading Hospital said, updating the previous toll.

Sardar Hussain, who lost three relatives in the blast, said the mosque was the only place of worship for the Shi'ite community in Peshawar's old city.

Attacks by Islamist insurgents had become an almost daily occurrence in Pakistan until the military launched a crackdown on militants in 2014.

'PANIC SPREAD'

Worshippers at the mosque in Peshawar had gathered for Friday prayers, when congregations are usually the largest.

"Panic spread among the worshippers when the firing started. I ran to save my life," one man, who did not give his name, told Reuters at a hospital where he was being treated for his injuries.

"Suddenly a man came in and started firing... He shot many people (and) then closed his eyes and blew himself up. After that, I have no idea what happened," he said.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan condemned the bombing, according to his office.

The attack comes as the Australian cricket team are touring Pakistan for the first time in over two decades and staying in Islamabad, 140 kilometres (87 miles) from Peshawar.

Pakistan recently started hosting international teams again after security concerns forced them to shift many of their high profile international events to the UAE.

Following the blast, the Australian cricket coach Andrew McDonald said the team touring Pakistan will be guided by security experts.

Former EU FoRB Special Envoy Jan Figel's views on religious freedom

Part I

About blasphemy laws; violence against religious minorities; kidnapping, forced conversion and marriages of non-Muslim girls

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)

HRWF (19.02.2022) - On the eve of the 8th Meeting of the Istanbul Process against religious intolerance, stigmatisation, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief hosted by Pakistan, EU Special Representative for Human Rights Eamon Gilmore delivered some [welcoming remarks](#) on behalf of the EU on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18.

Human Rights Without Frontiers interviewed former EU Special Envoy Jan Figel to share his views about the situation of religious freedom in Pakistan as during his mandate he had vigorously and successfully stood up for the case of [Asia Bibi](#), a Christian sentenced to death by hanging on alleged blasphemy charges. After years spent on the death row, she was acquitted in 2018 by the Supreme Court on the grounds of insufficient evidence. She now lives in Canada.

HRWF: Pakistan is a beneficiary of the GSP+ scheme, which grants a privileged access for its products to the EU market, but members of the European Parliament and civil society organizations in Europe are pressing Brussels to suspend this status due to egregious violations of human rights in Pakistan. What is their main area of concern?

Jan Figel: Pakistan has been benefitting from trade preferences under the GSP+ program since 2014. The overall economic incentives from this unilateral trade advantage for the country are considerable, reaching billions of Euros. But almost every year the European Parliament adopts a critical resolution or statement on various crimes, human rights violations or judicial abuses. The GSP+ status came with the obligation for Pakistan to ratify and implement 27 international conventions, including commitments to guarantee human rights and religious freedom. This is a frequent and vast problem in Pakistan. The latest GSP+ assessment of Pakistan in 2020 by the Commission expressed a variety of serious concerns on the human rights situation in the country, notably the lack of progress in limiting the scope and implementation of the death penalty.

One of the most striking issues has been the continued use of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan since 1986 after they were adopted by the former military regime. Regrettably, civilian governments have not had enough goodwill, or courage, afterwards to get rid of these stringent provisions that are frequently misused against a neighbor or an opponent to settle personal scores. Almost 1900 persons have been charged in total so far, with the highest numbers in recent years. In 2019 the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed mentioned the case of Asia Bibi in his annual Report as one of the examples of a revival of anti-blasphemy and anti-apostasy laws and the use of public order laws to limit any expression deemed offensive to religious communities.

As a Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the EU (2016-2019) I followed the case of Asia Bibi very closely and was involved with Pakistani authorities, repeatedly and intensively. The EU showed here its positive influence; it was an excellent example of effective diplomacy and soft power. Regrettably, this important effort has not been continued, there is no Special Envoy for FoRB outside the EU anymore. Obviously, FoRB is not a priority today as it was under Juncker's Commission.

HRWF: To what extent are religious minorities victims of human rights violations and discrimination in Pakistan?

Jan Figel: Religious minorities face many types of social and religious discrimination. Such discrimination is also observed at the official level in state and public employment as well as in private sector jobs. Minorities are disliked, ignored and sidelined. Even in schools, children face such challenges. My Pakistani friends quite often tell me about their painful experience.

Discrimination of religious minorities became a usual, daily phenomenon in Pakistan, both officially and socially in the larger society. State condemnation of violence and discrimination of religious minorities especially against Hindus and Christians is, regrettably, only a lip service. We all know that slogans and hollow statements can never replace sincere commitments, continued efforts and justice for all. They are just meant to appease the international audience.

The most severe situation concerns Ahmadis, who claim their Islamic identity and belonging, but this is not recognized by the State. Members of this community are openly and constitutionally discriminated against and they are frequently attacked by violent mobs. The government repeatedly showed its impotence to protect religious

minorities who are regularly harassed: mainly Christians, Hindus, Shias, Ahmadis and Sikhs.

HRWF: Can you give some examples of recent incidents targeting religious minorities?

Jan Figel: There are too many examples to share, unfortunately. Here are some of them. In 2020 Saleem Masih, a 22-year-old man in the city of Kasur, in Punjab province, was tortured to death by local landlords after they accused him of 'polluting' the water he bathed in. His only fault was that he was a Christian. He was tortured to death for taking a dip in a village tube well in Pakistan.

Tabitha Gill, a Christian nurse in Karachi, was beaten in January 2021 by her Muslim colleagues who accused her of blasphemy.

Recently, Salma Tanveer, a Muslim woman and a mother of five children, was sentenced to death in September 2021 after spending nine years in prison.

Aneeqa Ateeq, a 26-year-old Muslim woman, was also sentenced to death in January 2022.

Some radical Muslims killed a Shia sect cleric Maulana Khan for alleged blasphemy in autumn 2020 in Karachi.

Blasphemy incidents affect Muslims and non-believers as well. It is critically high time to look closely at these issues and correct this whole unjust system.

A Sri Lankan factory manager was beaten to death and set ablaze by a mob over blasphemy accusations in Sialkot city, in Punjab, in December last.

Recently, in February, a crowd snatched a man accused of blasphemy at a police station in Khanewal, also in the Punjab Province. He was beaten and hanged. As journalist Waqar Gillani puts it, there is an unending tale of horror in Pakistan...

One must wonder where the rule of law is. On which side do the police stand?

Punjab Governor Salman Taseer was shot dead by an official bodyguard in 2011 because he criticized the blasphemy laws and demanded Asia Bibi to be pardoned. Shortly after Taseer was gunned down, Shabaz Bhatti, the Federal Minister for Minorities and the only Christian in the Cabinet, was shot dead.

Peace in society is the fruit of justice. Justice delayed is justice denied, I repeated during my missions to Pakistan in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore and Ravalpindi. Justice needs more than labels, slogans or words – it needs action, decisions and perseverance.

HRWF: Is there some truth in the kidnapping and forced conversion stories of about 1000 Pakistani girls per year?

Jan Figel: Rights groups say that every year in Pakistan as many as 1,000 minority girls are forcibly converted to Islam, often after being abducted or tricked. According to Amarnath Motumal, the vice-chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an estimated 20 or more Hindu girls are abducted and forcefully converted every month, although exact figures are impossible to gather.

In a shocking decision, the Lahore High Court has recently ruled in favor of a Muslim perpetrator who forcibly abducted, converted to Islam and married an underage Christian girl called Maria Shahbaz. The 14-year-old girl was abducted in Faisalabad in April 2020.

So, it is a majority Muslim dominance issue. The formal law does not allow marriage before 18 years. Such child conversions and marriages are therefore illegal. Recently, Pakistan has tried to pass a law against forced conversions but later the Government gave in to pressure of religious extremists and in September the bill was deferred.

Part II

About laws to be amended; Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis and Muslims in prison or on the death row on blasphemy charges; the EU monitoring of the implementation of the GSP+; the controversial Single National Curriculum; the planned mission to Pakistan of EU's Special Representative for Human Rights Eamon Gilmore

See Part I [here](#)

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF)

HRWF (21.02.2022) - On 10 February 2021, three Members of the European Parliament Intergroup on FoRB – Peter van Dalen (EPP), Bert-Jan Ruissen (ECR), Joachim Kuhs (ID) - filed a written [parliamentary question](#) addressed to Josep Borrell, High Representative/ Vice President of the Commission, in which they raised the controversial issue of the privileged GSP+ status granted to Pakistan as follows: *"Given the blasphemy laws in Pakistan and the unjustified treatment of religious minorities in Pakistan that they lead to, is the VP/HR considering ending the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus preferences for Pakistan? If not, why not?"*

On 15 April 2021, the weak [answer](#) of the Vice-president of the Commission was not giving much hope to human rights defenders in Pakistan and in Europe:

"The 2018-2019 Report on the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) shows that Pakistan is making progress over time in areas such as the elimination of honour killings, the protection of transgender persons, and the protection of women's and children's rights.

However, a number of shortcomings still remain. The report includes reducing the scope for the death penalty as one of the priority areas for action. The EU will continue to closely monitor, address and encourage further progress on these issues."

On 29 April 2021, the European Parliament adopted a [Resolution on Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan](#), in which it

"Calls on the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) to immediately review Pakistan's eligibility for GSP+ status in the light of current events and whether there is sufficient reason to initiate a procedure for the temporary withdrawal of this status and the benefits that come with it, and to report to the European Parliament on this matter as soon as possible."

681 members of the European Parliament voted in favor of the resolution: only three MEPs opposed it.

Human Rights Without Frontiers interviewed former EU Special Envoy Jan Figel to share his views about the concerns of the European Parliament related to the continuation of the GSP+ status despite the persistent violations of religious freedom, the abuse of the blasphemy laws and the repeated sentences to the death penalty, the non-prosecution of perpetrators of violence, forced marriages and conversion of non-Muslim girls to Islam, and various other breaches of international law.

HRWF: Which laws in Pakistan are contrary to international agreements and should be urgently amended?

Jan Figel: Blasphemy laws are the single most draconian laws that undermine freedom of thought, religion or expression. It literally suffocates the religious minorities, instills deadly fear of mob violence and forces religious minorities into submission to the whims and authority of the majority.

Government efforts towards Islamization of Pakistan's civil and criminal law, which began in the early 1980s, have dangerously undermined fundamental right to freedom of religion and expression, and have led to serious abuses against the country's religious minorities. The broad and vague provisions of a series of laws known collectively as the "blasphemy" laws, which strengthen criminal penalties for offenses against Islam, have been used to bring politically motivated charges of blasphemy or other religious offenses against members of religious minorities as well as some Muslims.

The blasphemy laws have also contributed to a climate of religious bigotry which has led to discrimination, harassment and violent attacks on minorities - abuses which are apparently tolerated, if not condoned, by some political leaders and government officials.

HRWF: Our organization has a database of dozens of documented cases of Christian, Hindu, Ahmadi and even Muslim Pakistanis who are on the death row or have been sentenced to heavy prison terms or have been in pretrial detention for years on blasphemy charges. Does the judicial system work in conformity with international standards in this regard?

Jan Figel: In theory and on paper the judicial system may appear to work in conformity with international standards but in practice and reality on the ground it does not. The state influences action or inaction on any judicial process on matters of religious content in courts, keeping the political expediency at the forefront. This forces guilty verdicts or delayed verdicts in sensitive religious cases.

The most prominent example is the case of Asia Bibi. This woman from humble background was mercilessly beaten and charged with blasphemy for drinking water from a container used by her Muslim co-workers. She was sentenced to death by a lower court and subsequently by higher courts on appeal. However, when her case became known in international media, Pakistan found a way to release her after nine years of incarceration. The Supreme Court of Pakistan squashed the case on technical grounds but still did not declare her innocent. Asia Bibi had to flee from Pakistan to Canada under a hush deal between the two countries.

Quite often, the police also fail to protect vulnerable groups and individuals. This was the case on February 14, in Lahore, when 25-year old Pervez Masih was killed by a violent mob although the police had been informed and called for protection.

In Pakistan, the rule of law is weak and justice is delayed or not carried out because of the religious indoctrination of masses and street power. Quite often semi-illiterate religious clerics force the judicial system to bow down to their influences. The state security and law enforcing authorities are weak and also subject to some religious

considerations. Due to this weakness, several courageous judges have been killed or had to flee the country.

The criminal justice system in Pakistan needs overhauling and courage in this context. It is flawed. There is a tacit support to the complainant's side at all levels: police, prisons and courts. Amid fears, pressures and like-mindedness the judges try to shift the decision to higher and superior courts. Sometimes, their partiality is obvious, even in their judgments.

In a recent court ruling, the judge in Rawalpindi sentenced to the death penalty a Muslim woman accused of blasphemy, saying she was not only a blasphemer but also an apostate, for which she deserved the capital punishment.

So, there are few examples when the judicial system works in conformity with international standards. If it happens that is only at Supreme Court level, which is the highest level.

HRWF: To what extent does or doesn't Pakistan promote religious tolerance in its school education system?

Jan Figel: The education system should do much more for interreligious and interethnic tolerance and coexistence. On the contrary, one can see instillation of hate against Hindus, in particular by misrepresenting and concocting the struggle for India's independence from British colonial rule. The word Hindu for some groups represents an enemy of Pakistan and Islam.

There are positive efforts but a traditional mindset prevails in society. Discrimination and intolerance exist in the administration, and also among educators and teachers. Noteworthy is that the recent compulsory Single National Curriculum (SNC) also has a religious perspective; even in the English and science classes, religion has been introduced. The State has been defined as a religious one, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, since the times of the military regime... There are fears that this SNC will increase intolerance and biases, and will have an adverse impact.

Good literacy for all and relevant education is needed for peace, coexistence and more promising development in Pakistan. But the content of education is a decisive factor! The state must take more of that and do its duty properly.

HRWF: The GSP+ has been the best attempt of the EU at being concrete and objective about the importance of international treaties in its relationships with third countries. Soon, DG Trade, the EEAS and several services within the Commission will evaluate to what extent Pakistan has been complying with the 27 international agreements that are conditions to receive and keep the "GSP+" status that is worth billions of Euro, greatly benefitting the economy of Pakistan. What is your view on this process?

Jan Figel: I agree that the GSP+ is a great EU instrument to bring important rules, values and sustainable development into beneficiary countries, including the largest one among them - Pakistan. Here it cannot be "business as usual". The EEAS runs a big EU Delegation of diplomats and has some detailed knowledge of the reality on the ground. It is important for the Commission to have a fair assessment and recommendations in line with the agreed objectives of this Agreement, and for the European Parliament and the Council to adopt responsible positions. Only a Europe caring about justice can be a strong, constructive and respected global actor.

Twenty-seven international treaties that are the conditions to receive and keep the “GSP+” status should be not only signed and ratified by the Government and the Parliament of Pakistan. They must be implemented (!) in practice for the benefit of people. Those treaties cover human rights, the rule of law, environmental protection, labor law, the fight against corruption, etc.

To this end, Pakistan has created the TIC – Treaties Implementation Cell. Therefore, the EU should focus on the monitoring of the implementation. A lot of European taxpayers’ money is donated to Pakistan in support of these commitments. It is time for a fair and credible assessment. This would be the only effective tool of the EU to force Pakistan to review its symptomatic, visible injustice towards its religious minorities.

HRWF: Do you think that by ignoring the non-compliance with a number of international treaties the EU would really be helping Pakistan and that other unsuccessful candidates for the GSP+ status would not feel discriminated against by perceived EU’s double standards ?

Jan Figel: By unconditionally condoning Pakistan, the EU is sending an inconsistent, wrong message to the other candidate countries. The Union must have one credible face and refuse double standards. Pakistani authorities speak a lot about democracy and protection of minorities. They have a ministry for human rights but there are many fresh blood stains on the white strip of Pakistan’s flag. The inspirational founding father of Pakistan, Ali Jinnah, needs followers in deeds, not in words.

HRWF: Considering Pakistan’s neighborhood and Europe’s interests, do you think it is justified to let Pakistan off the hook on human rights issues, because of the situation in Afghanistan and its influence in Pakistan?

Jan Figel: Pakistan is an important EU partner and a nuclear power but which country is not important in this region? If for this reason we let Pakistan continue to implement the same policies, it will only encourage it to play its geopolitical and geostrategic card. Status quo is not enough for the betterment of lives and relations within the country. Pakistan must be held accountable for its actions and its commitments. This is the best service the EU can provide to people of good will in Pakistan.

HRWF: What should Eamon Gilmore, the EU’s Special Representative for Human Rights, tell the Pakistani authorities when visiting Pakistan later this month?

Jan Figel: The EU Special Representative should ask the Government of Imran Khan to address the issue of the draconian blasphemy laws. I would recommend him to talk about the fairness of the administrative, legal and judicial systems dealing with, investigating and taking decisions about blasphemy cases. There must be a fair and impartial way of treating such cases. The Government also should think of a consensual mechanism to deal with the growing number of blasphemy cases, especially under the cybercrime legislation.

Eamon Gilmore was supportive of FoRB promotion and we had some very constructive cooperation during my mandate as EU FoRB Special Envoy. He may encourage the authorities of Pakistan to adopt effective and transparent laws, programs and actions to improve the situation of economically and socially marginalized religious minorities. The members of these communities are frequently relegated to the lowest and unhygienic waste cleaning jobs while they should given equal employment opportunities to show their talents.

As a former EU Commissioner for Education, Culture and Youth I would strongly recommend to the EU Commission to offer active cooperation and creative professional

review of Pakistan's new "One Curriculum" schoolbooks for the promotion of religious tolerance.

Without a necessary and credible review, the Single National Curriculum may increase hatred, discrimination and prejudices and may also lead to the misuse of blasphemy cases. Good and accessible education unites people and builds bridges among nations as well. Education is important for future of Pakistan both internally and externally.

Hazaras in Pakistan, fleeing Afghanistan

The Afghani Hazaras are Shiite, and were repeatedly persecuted by Sunni extremists, leading to four waves of refugees who went to Pakistan.

by Massimo Introvigne

Article 1 of 5



Hazara children. Credits.

Bitter Winter (14.02.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3uSdvrI> - Shiites have been persecuted and targeted by radical Sunni extremists in Pakistan since the 1980s. Although there are Shiites of different ethnicity in the country, one group has paid the heaviest tribute of blood, the Hazaras.

The Hazaras are of Mongolian-Turkic origin, speak a Persian language, and are easily distinguishable for their Mongolian-like facial features. Statistics are in themselves

political, but there may be some 700,000 Hazaras in Pakistan, a number that can grow to one million by including refugees from Afghanistan who are not Pakistani citizens.

Hazaras are proud of their Mongolian origins, and like to refer to themselves as descendants of Genghis Khan (ca. 1160–1227). DNA analysis has confirmed that they descend from Mongol soldiers who settled in present-day Afghanistan after the Medieval invasions, but they intermarried with other Turkic and non-Turkic populations. Although there were Hazaras in areas of what is today Pakistan near the Afghan border even before, the Pakistani Hazaras largely derive from comparatively recent migrations from Afghanistan, which started in the 19th century.

Historians have distinguished between four waves of Hazara migration to Pakistan. The first took place in the 1830s and 1840s. It was an economic migration, as Afghan Hazaras were hired by British companies to work in railroad construction and coal mines. Since Hazaras were good warriors, they were also recruited in the British Indian Army, and when service there ended some settled in present-day Pakistan for economic reasons.

The second migration was of refugees escaping the bloody persecutions of the Amir of Afghanistan Abdul Raman Khan (1844–1901). The Amir is remembered as the father of modern Afghanistan, which he managed to unify and govern with an iron fist. He was also a fanatical Sunni Muslim, who regarded Shi'a as a heresy to be eradicated. In turn, abuses against the Hazara population led to three uprisings against the Amir, in 1888–1890, 1892, and 1893.



Hazara prisoners in the 1880s. Credits.

Again, statistics are controversial. Historians believe that roughly half of the Hazaras living in Afghanistan were killed, but there was no reliable census of the Afghan population before the 1970s. Reflecting the uncertainty of statistics, estimates of those killed range from 300,000 to 600,000. The numbers fully justify the definition of what

happened as a genocide. As in all genocides, there were different motivations for the Amir's policies, including seizing the properties of well-off Hazaras and a fear that they may side with his relatives who were trying to overthrow him. There was also an old ethnic conflict between the Hazaras and the Pashtuns, the dominant ethnolinguistic group in Afghanistan, which is largely Sunni (although some Shiite Pashtun tribes also exist). However, the religious roots of the genocide, while coexisting with other motivations, cannot be denied.

Britain played an ambiguous role in the Hazara uprisings of the 19th century. British military advisers and some troops helped the Amir. At the same time, the British favored the resettlement of Hazara refugees in British India, while others went to Iran. Of those who remained in Afghanistan and survived the genocide, tens of thousands, particularly women, were sold as slaves. Hazara folklore remembers the story, or legend, of *Chehl Dukhtar*, i.e., the "Forty Girls" who committed suicide rather than being captured by the Amir's soldiers and sold as slaves presumably losing their virginity.



International media on the Hazara slave trade in Afghanistan. Credits.

The Hazara community in Pakistan grew with a third wave of refugees, escaping the Communist and Soviet persecution in Afghanistan during the years when the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was in power, from 1978 to 1992.

Already in 1979, after the arrest of Hazara intellectuals as part of the government's crackdown on the Muslim elite, the Hazaras demonstrated in Kabul on June 23 and some 2,000 were killed or executed after arrest. At the same time, some Hazaras believed that the Communists would protect them from Sunni persecution, and joined the PDPA. One Hazara, Sultan Ali Keshmand, served twice as Prime Minister during the PDPA years. When the PDPA fell, Keshmand escaped to Russia and then to Britain, where he now advocates for the rights of persecuted Hazaras. Many of the latter never trusted the PDPA, and sought refuge in Pakistan.

The fourth wave of Hazara emigration to Pakistan happened during the civil war and the Taliban era, and continues to this day. The Taliban are part of a Sunni radical movement that regards the Shiite as heretics, and repeatedly carried out massacres of the Hazaras. Hazara sources claim that more than 15,000 have been killed since the fall of the Soviet-backed PDPA regime. Not all have been killed by the Taliban. The so-called Afshar Operation of February 1993 was led by the anti-Taliban Ahmad Shah Massoud (1953–2001) with the aim of eradicating the Shiite militias, including the predominantly Hazara Hezbe Wahdat, which controlled a part of Kabul.



Logo of the Hezbe Wahdat party. *Credits.*

They had fought together with Massoud against the Soviets but now threatened the coalition government. Massoud's troops entered the Afshar district of Kabul, and the conflict degenerated into a massacre of the Shiite population, both Hazara and non-Hazara. To his credit, Massoud tried to stop the assassination and rape frenzy against the Shiites, but not before hundreds had been killed, and hundreds of women raped.

In August 1998, as a retaliation for the execution of some 3,000 Taliban prisoners in Mazar-i-Sharif (ordered by a Sunni Pashtun commander), the Taliban entered the city and targeted mostly the Hazaras, whom they had declared "non-Muslim" and "infidels." Estimates of Hazaras killed range from 5,000 to 20,000.

Massacres became routine since the 2010s with the emergence of a new actor, the Islamic State (ISIS), which also regards Shiite as non-Muslim. At least from 2015, ISIS and the Taliban fought each other in Afghanistan. Taliban propaganda occasionally claimed that they were now implementing a politic of toleration of the Hazaras, and massacres were perpetrated by ISIS only. However, as late as 2021, Amnesty International and other NGOs **found evidence** that the Taliban were slaughtering Hazaras as well. On the other hand, ISIS was responsible of the deadliest incidents, with hundreds of Hazaras strangled, beheaded, or killed by bombs during suicide attacks.

It is not surprising that these incidents led a new wave of Hazara refugees to Pakistan, although some went to the West or to Iran. In Pakistan, these Hazara refugees found the descendants of their co-religionists who had immigrated in the 19th and early 20th century. But they soon discovered they were not safe in Pakistan either.

[Hazaras in Pakistan 2: The Rise of Anti-Shiite Extremism](#)

[Hazaras in Pakistan 3: The Deadly Attacks of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi \(LeJ\)](#)

[Hazaras in Pakistan. 4. The Third Wave of Anti-Hazara Terrorist Attacks, 2010–2015](#)

[Hazaras in Pakistan. 5. Two New Enemies: ISIS and COVID, 2016–2022](#)

Man accused of blasphemy stoned to death by mob in Pakistan

Police say an enraged mob has stoned to death a middle-aged man for allegedly desecrating the Quran inside a mosque in a remote village in eastern Pakistan

By Asim Tanveer

ABC News (14.02.2022) - <https://abcn.ws/34W33UV> - An enraged mob stoned to death a middle-aged man for allegedly desecrating the Quran inside a mosque in a remote village in eastern Pakistan, police said Sunday. Three police officers also were injured, and more than 80 men have been detained.

The mosque's custodian said he saw the man burning the Muslim holy book and told others before informing police, according to police spokesman Chaudhry Imran. The violence took place Saturday evening in Khanewal district in Punjab province.

Imran said police rushed to the mosque and found the man surrounded by an angry crowd. Officer Mohammad Iqbal and two subordinates tried to take custody of the man but the group began throwing stones at them, seriously injuring Iqbal and slightly injuring the other two officers.

Munawar Gujjar, chief of Tulamba police station, said he rushed reinforcements to the mosque but they did not arrive before the mob had stoned to death the man and hung his body from a tree.

Gujjar said the victim was Mushtaq Ahmed, 41, of a nearby village.

"The ill-fated man has been mentally unstable for the last 15 years and according to his family often went missing from home for days begging and eating whatever he could find," he said. He said the body was handed to the family.

Mian Mohammad Ramzan, the mosque custodian, said he saw smoke inside the mosque, which is adjacent to his home, and rushed to investigate. He found one Quran burned and saw a man attempting to burn another. He said people were starting to arrive for evening prayers as he was shouting for the man to stop.

Witnesses said a police team that reached the village before the stoning began took custody of a man but the mob snatched him away from them and beat the police as they tried to rescue him.

Later, more officers and constables reached the scene and took custody of the body, they said.

Gujjar, the area police chief, said investigators were scanning available videos to try to identify the assailants. He said police had so far detained about 80 men living in the mosque's surroundings but that about 300 suspects took part.

Prime Minister Imran Khan expressed his anguish over the stoning and said he was seeking a report from Punjab's chief minister on the police handling of the case. He said they "failed in their duty."

"We have zero tolerance for anyone taking the law into their own hands and mob lynching will be dealt with with the full severity of the law," he said in a tweet hours after the incident.

Khan also asked the Punjab police chief for a report on the actions taken against perpetrators of the lynching.

The killing comes months after the lynching of a Sri Lankan manager of a sporting goods factory in Sialkot in Punjab province on Dec. 3 who was accused by workers of blasphemy.

Mob attacks on people accused of blasphemy are common in this conservative Islamic nation. International and national rights groups say blasphemy accusations have often been used to intimidate religious minorities and settle personal scores. Blasphemy is punishable by death in Pakistan.

Photo : Relatives carry the body of Mushtaq Ahmed, 41, who was killed when an enraged mob stoned him to death for allegedly desecrating the Quran, in Tulamba, a remote village in the district of Khanewal in eastern Pakistan, Sunday, Feb. 13, 2022. Mob attacks on people accused of blasphemy are common in this conservative Islamic nation where blasphemy is punishable by death. (AP Photo/Asim Tanveer)

Christian group demands release of jailed Pakistani Hindu

Notan Lal, who ran a school in Sindh province, was charged with blasphemy and given 25 years jail term

By Kamran Chaudhry

UCA News (11.02.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3Bnqhj5> - An international rights organization focused on religious freedom has demanded the immediate release of a Hindu school principal in Pakistan after he was sentenced to 25 years in prison on blasphemy charges.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) joined Hindu groups to seek justice for Notan Lal after a court in court in Sukkur, Sindh province found him guilty of blasphemy on Feb. 7.

"CSW is deeply concerned by the heavy sentence handed down to Notan Lal," said CSW's Founder President Mervyn Thomas in a Feb. 10 press release.

Lal was accused of blasphemy by an 11-grade student of his school in 2019. He was accused of making "derogatory remarks" against the Prophet.

Thomas said Lal was "the latest victim of Pakistan's unjust blasphemy laws, which are wholly incompatible with the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief, and which must be reviewed urgently, with a view to their full repeal in the future."

"We call for Mr. Lal's immediate and unconditional release, and for that of all those imprisoned or detained on similar charges," Thomas added.

In a Facebook post, the All Pakistan Hindu Panchayat requested higher authorities and the chief justice of Pakistan to re-investigate the case.

"Very sad, lots of innocent people are being punished for a crime they didn't commit. Everybody knows who got him framed on false charges," it stated.

Lal owned and ran the private school in Ghotki in Sindh province. He was detained on Sept 15, 2019, soon after a student accused him of insulting the Prophet Muhammad.

The controversial accusations against him prompted protests and riots in Ghotki with unruly mobs ransacking the school, vandalizing a Hindu temple and looting shops.

Most Hindus in Pakistan live in the southern Sindh province and are often the target of extremist groups.

According to the Centre for Social Justice, at least 1,890 persons have been accused of committing blasphemy from 1987 to 2021.

There have been 81 extrajudicial killings on suspicion of blasphemy and apostasy from 1992 until 2021. Among the victims, 45 were Muslims, 23 Christians, nine Ahmadis, two Hindus, and two persons whose religious identity could not be ascertained.

Last month, a 50-year-old Hindu trader Sutan Lal Dewan was shot dead by armed men when he was returning home from an inauguration ceremony at a cotton factory in Daharki town in Ghotki district, Sindh province.

Photo : Notan Lal at his school in Ghotki town, Sindh province of Pakistan. (Photo supplied)

Police accused of desecrating Ahmadi graves

At least 45 tombstones in Ahmadi cemetery targeted after complaint about community's use of holy verses on tombstones.

By Kamran Chaudhry

UCA News (08.02.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3JfrM5F> - Pakistan's leading rights body joined other rights groups in condemning the desecration of 45 gravestones of Ahmadiyya people, allegedly by policemen, calling it a worrying trend that is targeting the minority Islamic sect.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said it was "appalled to learn" that some police officers allegedly desecrated the graves in Hafizabad district of Punjab province on Feb. 4 and 5.

The desecration followed "complaints from a local resident who objected to the community's use of holy verses on its tombstones," the rights commission said in a [Feb.7 tweet](#).

"Worryingly, such acts are becoming almost routine, leaving members of the Ahmadiyya community as beleaguered in death as they are in life. The desecration of graves is an affront to human dignity and must not be permitted," it said.

"If the government is sincere in its bid to make Pakistan a more inclusive society, it must counter and punish all such acts."

Officials in Rabwah, the Ahmadiyya community headquarters in Punjab province, are using social media to condemn the desecration.

"This graveyard has been there since 1974. The illegal acts taken by the DPO Hafizabad against the Ahmadiyya Community is not only a violation of Human Rights but also an act that has further dimmed the face of our beloved country Pakistan in the eyes of the International Community," the Press Section of [Jama'at Ahmadiyya Pakistan](#) said in a series of tweets yesterday.

"Who says life is safe in Pakistan. Ahmadis here are not safe even in their graves. Where should one go when those responsible for your protection stalk you," Amir Mehmood, who handles communications for the Ahmadi sect, said in a Facebook post.

Ahmadis are considered by mainstream Pakistani Muslims as heretics because of their belief that their founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was a prophesized messiah.

In 1984, President General Zia ul-Haq promulgated Ordinance XX introducing Ahmadiyya-specific laws to prohibit Ahmadiyya people from indulging in "anti-Islamic activities" by restricting them from referring to themselves as Muslims or preaching their belief.

The Ahmadiyya population in Pakistan has declined over almost two decades, according to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics report on the sixth Population and Housing Census-2017, released last year.

Ahmadiyya people make up 0.09 percent of Pakistan's population of 207.68 million. But the 1998 census showed that they formed 0.21 percent of the 132 million people in Pakistan at the time.

Last year police in Sharaqpur Sharif, also in Punjab province, registered blasphemy cases against 11 Ahmadiyya people and organizers of the community for inscribing [Islamic phrases on gravestones](#).

According to Rabwah records, 39 Ahmadiyya corpses were exhumed, while 69 burials of Ahmadiyya people were denied in the common cemetery from 1984 to 2018.

Photo : The desecrated tombstones of Ahmadi graves in district Hafizabad, Punjab province. (Photo: Amir Mehmood)

Pastor shot dead in ambush attack after Sunday service

By Anugrah Kumar

Christian Post (31.01.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3uciGIW> - In what police called a "terrorist act," two unidentified men followed a pastor returning home in his car after a Sunday worship service and shot him to death in Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar, which in 2013 was the scene of one of the deadliest attacks on Christians in the country.

The pastor, identified as 75-year-old William Siraj of Shaheed-e-All Saints Church from the Church of Pakistan denomination comprising Methodist and Anglican churches, was shot twice in the abdomen as he and his colleague, identified as Pastor Patrick Naeem, were driving home from church on Sunday.

The shooting occurred near Ring Road in the city's Gulbahar area, leaving Pastor Siraj dead and Pastor Naeem injured, Pakistan's Dawn newspaper [reported](#), adding that Naeem had been discharged from the hospital where he was treated for minor injuries. Pastor Siraj's body had been handed over to his family.

News channels showed emergency services removing the pastor from the car as people chanted "Long live Jesus Christ" while carrying his body on a bed through the streets to a house, according to [Reuters](#).

"We demand justice and protection of Christians from the Government of Pakistan," [tweeted](#) Bishop Azad Marshall from the Church of Pakistan.

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby also responded to the news of the attack. "... We pray for the light of Christ's justice, hope and peace for our sisters and brothers in the Church of Pakistan," he wrote on [Twitter](#).

Capital City Police Officer Abbas Ahsan called it a "terror attack" and said, "We are determined to protect minorities."

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province's Chief Minister Mahmood Khan offered his condolences to the Christian community and the family of the deceased.

On Saturday, Pakistan's interior minister Sheikh Rasheed Ahmed warned of possible terrorist strikes across the country over the next two months as security agencies had learned about sleeper cells of militant outfits in that region, The Times of India [reported](#). No one had claimed responsibility for the shooting as of Monday.

The country's northwestern areas bordering Afghanistan have seen a rise in militant attacks on security forces in recent days, many of them claimed by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, which is close to the Afghan Taliban, Reuters [said](#).

In 2013, at least 81 Christians were killed after two suicide [bombers blew themselves up](#) at a church belonging to the Church of Pakistan denomination in Peshawar as hundreds of worshipers were leaving Sunday mass.

About 400 worshipers were exchanging greetings after the service at the 130-year-old All Saints Church when the two bombers, each carrying about 13 pounds of explosives,

launched the attack. The walls were pockmarked with ball bearings that had been packed into the bombs to cause maximum carnage in the busy church.

There are about 70,000 Christians in Peshawar. The community accounts for about 2% of the 180 million people in Pakistan.

Muslim minorities, including Shias and Ahmaddiyas, also often face attacks by Sunni terror groups in Pakistan.

Photo : BANARAS KHAN/AFP via Getty Images

Pakistani court sentences woman to death for WhatsApp 'blasphemy'

Muslim woman convicted for sharing images deemed to be insulting to Islam's Prophet Muhammad and one of his wives.

By Asad Hashim

Al Jazeera (20/01/2021) - <https://bit.ly/3fPD0RD> - A Pakistani court has sentenced a Muslim woman to death for committing "blasphemy" by sharing images deemed to be insulting to Islam's Prophet Muhammad and one of his wives, also considered a holy personage by many Muslims.

The trial court in the northern Pakistani city of Rawalpindi on Wednesday sentenced Aneeqa Ateeq under the country's strict blasphemy laws, which impose a [mandatory death penalty](#) for insulting the Prophet Muhammad.

"The blasphemous material which was shared/installed by the female accused on her status [on WhatsApp messaging platform] and the messages as well as caricatures which were sent to the complainant are totally unbearable and not tolerable for a Muslim," Judge Adnan Mushtaq wrote in his verdict in the case.

Ateeq, 26, had pleaded not guilty to the charges, which were first filed in May 2020.

In a statement to the court, Ateeq said her accuser, Hasnat Farooq, had deliberately pulled her into a religious discussion to frame her after she refused "to be friendly" towards him. The two had met on a popular online multiplayer game and continued communicating on WhatsApp.

"So I feel that he intentionally dragged into this topic for revenge, that's why he got registered [sic] a case against me and during [WhatsApp] chat he collected everything that went against me," she said in an evidentiary statement.

Farooq contends the accused shared the allegedly blasphemous material as a WhatsApp status and refused to delete it when he confronted her on that messaging platform.

Ateeq's death sentence is subject to confirmation by the Lahore High Court, a forum before which she also has the right of appeal.

[Blasphemy is a sensitive subject](#) in Pakistan, where the country's strict laws carry harsh penalties for several types of offences, including sentences of up to life imprisonment for some forms of the crime and the [mandatory death sentence for insulting the Prophet Muhammad](#).

Increasingly, allegations of blasphemy have led to extrajudicial violence, mob justice or widespread violent protests.

Since 1990, at least 80 people have been killed in connection with blasphemy allegations, according to an Al Jazeera tally. Those killed include people accused of blasphemy, their family members, their lawyers and at least one judge, according to the data.

In the latest such attack, a Sri Lankan textile factory manager was [beaten to death](#) by a mob and his body burned publicly in the eastern city of Sialkot in December after he was accused of blasphemy by co-workers.

International rights groups say legal proceedings in blasphemy cases in Pakistan are often biased against the accused due to the charged nature of the allegations.

In a 2015 report, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) [found](#) that blasphemy trials in Pakistan were "fundamentally unfair", listing concerns ranging from intimidation and harassment of judges, "demonstrable bias and prejudice against defendants by judges", and investigations and prosecutions that do not meet due diligence requirements.

Photo : Aneeqa Ateeq's death sentence is subject to confirmation by the Lahore High Court, a forum before which she also has the right of appeal [File: B K Bangash/AP]

Religion-based terrorism, extremism on the rise in 2021

The yearly report of the authoritative Pak Institute for Peace Studies recommended urgent action by the Parliament.

By Marco Respinti

Bitter Winter (13.01.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3Goa3rO> - On January 5, 2022, the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PICS), a leading Pakistani think tank including prominent academics and journalists, released its yearly report on security for the year 2021.

The [section on terrorism](#) noted that ethno-nationalist and religiously motivated terrorist attacks increased by 42% in 2021 with respect to 2020, and the number of victims increased by 52%, the worst such surge in the last 15 years.

Year	No. of Terrorist Attacks (%Change)	No. of Killed (% Change)
2009	Baseline year (2,586 attacks)	Baseline year (3,021 Fatalities)
2010	18%↓	4%↓
2011	7%↓	18%↓
2012	20%↓	14%↓
2013	9%↑	19%↑
2014	30%↓	30%↓
2015	48%↓	38%↓
2016	28%↓	12%↓
2017	16%↓	10%↓
2018	29%↓	27%↓
2019	13%↓	40%↓
2020	36%↓	38%↓
2021	42%↑	52%↑

Evolution of terrorist attacks in Pakistan, 2009–2021. Source: [PIPS](#) Pakistan Security Report 2021.

207 attacks took 335 lives, and left another 555 wounded. The surge is mostly due to “religiously inspired militant groups,” the report says, singling out “Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), local Taliban groups, and Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K)” as the worst perpetrators. The developments in Afghanistan also made the situation in Pakistan worse.

More generally, as discussed [in a press conference on January 5](#), violent religious extremist groups are at work in all provinces in Pakistan. The PICS noted in particular the activities of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, a large Sufi but violent organization to which *Bitter Winter* devoted [a series of articles](#).

Against the “growing incidents of faith-based mob violence,” targeting in particular religious minorities harassed by different violent Islamic laws, the PICS believes that existing laws are not sufficient. It urged the Parliament to take action, enact new laws, and use the National Action Plan (NAP) as a tool against religious extremism and violence.

The PICS also recommended to strengthen the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA).

Photo : Bitter Winter

Pakistan's top court grants bail to Christian facing blasphemy charge

CatholicNewsAgency (10.01.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3r4TDOu> - The Supreme Court of Pakistan's decision to grant bail to a Christian accused of blasphemy should give hope to others facing the charge, according to a prominent lawyer.

Saif ul Malook welcomed the court's ruling on Jan. 6 that Nadeem Samson should be released on bail.

"It is a very important ruling, the first in the judicial history of Pakistan," the lawyer said in a video call [reported](#) by the [Jubilee Campaign](#), a nonprofit promoting human rights. Samson, identified as a [Catholic](#) by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)), was arrested in 2017 and imprisoned in Lahore, Pakistan's second-largest city, after a property dispute.

He was charged with insulting the Muslim Prophet Muhammad under Section 295-C of the [Pakistan Penal Code](#).

The 42-year-old's supporters believe that he was [falsely accused](#) of the crime, which is punishable by death in Pakistan, an Islamic republic in South Asia with a population of almost 227 million people.

Malook, who [represented Asia Bibi](#), a Catholic mother [acquitted](#) of blasphemy in 2018, petitioned the Supreme Court at a hearing on Jan. 5 to break with the practice of denying bail to people accused of blasphemy.

But asked if his successful petition was a signal that Samson would ultimately be released, the lawyer said: "That is a different story."

He noted that people accused of blasphemy, even without evidence, face significant risks, saying that "when Nadeem Samson is going to court he can be killed anytime."

There are around [4 million](#) Christians, including more than a million Catholics, in Pakistan.

The charity Open Doors ranks Pakistan as the [fifth-worst](#) country in the world in which to be a Christian.

"Christians in Pakistan face extreme persecution in every area of their lives," it said.

Among those currently awaiting trial for blasphemy are also humanists, Ahmadis, Sunnis, and Shiites.

In October 2021, U.N. human rights experts [criticized](#) the treatment of [Stephen Masih](#), a Christian from Sialkot District, in Punjab province, who was arrested in 2019 following a dispute with a neighbor. Three months after his arrest, he was informed that he was subject to blasphemy charges.

The Session Court in Sialkot denied Masih's bail request in August 2021.

"It is deeply alarming that a mere disagreement between neighbors could lead to the judicial harassment of an individual, based on his religious or other beliefs, and by the use of anti-blasphemy laws which may carry the death penalty," said the experts, who noted that Masih suffers from a psychosocial disability.

Photo : The Supreme Court of Pakistan in Islamabad. | Usman.pg via Wikimedia (CC BY-SA 3.0).

HRWF Project GSP+ EU/Pakistan: A Christian sentenced to death on blasphemy charges

CLAAS (06.01.2022) - <https://www.claas.org.uk> – A Christian man, Zafar Bhatti, 58, has been sentenced to death by the Pakistan session court of Rawalpindi, after being charged with blasphemy in 2012.

He is accused of sending blasphemous text messages from his phone but has always denied the allegation against him.

Bhatti faced a difficult situation when in the same year the District Bar Association Rawalpindi passed a resolution that no lawyers of District Bar Association would appear in any case under Section 295 of the Pakistan Penal Code on behalf of any accused.

Christian NGO Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS-PK) provided a lawyer but on May 3rd, 2017, Zafar was sentenced to life imprisonment for 295C, PPC, three years imprisonment, and fined ten thousand rupees for 298A PPC and one-year imprisonment and fined five thousand for 25D of the Telegraph Act.

An appeal against the conviction and life imprisonment was submitted to the Lahore High Court Bench in Rawalpindi, and since then the case has been transferred to different judges at least four times.

Last October high court judge, Mr. Justice Abdul Aziz, heard the case in Adiala jail and once again referred the case to the trial court to rewrite the judgment on technical grounds as he believed that Bhatti should have been given the death sentence instead of life imprisonment.

In September 2020 Bhatti suffered a heart attack in prison but because of swift medical attention his condition was stabilised but there are ongoing concerns for Zafar's physical and mental health. His lawyer, Tahir Bashir, called on the Lahore High Court (Rawalpindi Bench) to grant immediate bail on medical grounds and allow him access to medical treatment outside of jail, but the application was rejected. Bhatti also suffers from diabetes and his health condition continues to deteriorate.

He is held under high security due to threats to his life from extremists. All his case hearings have been conducted in Adiala Jail, Rawalpindi, causing great distress to him and his wife Nawab Bibi.

Nasir Saeed, director CLAAS-UK has expressed his concern stating that this is one of the longest imprisonment cases and it is only because of the Pakistan judicial system.

He said: "Since the promulgation of the blasphemy law in Pakistan, the law is oppressive and frequently misused. Provisions have been used as tools of revenge in personal conflicts, to target religious minorities and to oppress political opponents or critical voices, putting in jeopardy the lives of the accused and also their families, members of their communities, judges, lawyers and everyone that tries to seek justice.

"The situation continues to deteriorate, and minorities are living under constant threat as the government has failed to protect religious minorities in the last years, exacerbating existing religious divides and thus creating a climate of religious intolerance, violence and discrimination against vulnerable minority groups in the country, including Ahmadis, Hindus and Christians.

"In the recent year several blasphemy cases have been registered against Hindu, Christians and even against Muslims, on mere suspicion. At least six Christian nurses were accused of committing blasphemy, they were threatened, beaten and attempts made on their lives, but nobody has been brought to justice for attacking them and taking the law into their own hands.

"Several temples and churches were attacked and set on fire, while a 49-year-old Sri Lankan man, Priyantha Kumara Diyawadana, export manager of Rajco Industries, was lynched by a mob on 3 December 2021 in Sialkot, over allegations of committing blasphemy for removing a poster featuring religious content. He had lived and worked in Pakistan for eleven years, was beaten, killed and later set on fire by a mob in Sialkot."

Mr Saeed said that although Prime Minister Imran Khan has condemned the blasphemy killing and the military declared "zero tolerance" for extremists, that is not enough. He said this is the time for the government to take this matter seriously and make changes appropriately to stop the ongoing misuse of the blasphemy law.

Saeed also stated that CLAAS would maintain its support to the family.

Photo : Claas.org.uk
