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The systemic abuse of minority girls undermined by law and a retrograde educational curriculum

HRWF (28.03.2025) - On 26 March 2025, three NGOs - CAP/ Libert  de conscience, Human Rights Without Frontiers and Global Human Rights Defence - organized a side-event at the UN in Geneva in the framework of the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council.

The keynote speaker was Mr Jan Figel, former EU Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief (Slovakia)

The other speakers were

Willy Fautr , director of Human Rights Without Frontiers (Belgium)
Bert-Jan Ruissen, Member of the European Parliament (EU/ Netherlands)
Anwar Mehmood Rehman, Swiss Ahmaddiyya politician (Switzerland)
Inna Chevranova, Executive Director of European Facilitation Platform (Belgium)

The moderator was: Christine Mirre, Director of CAP/ Libert  de conscience (France)

Here is the text of Inna Chevranova's presentation:

Undermined by law and education, the systemic abuse of minority girls in Pakistan

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak at this important side event.

I would like to draw your attention to a pressing human rights concern: the forced conversions and marriages of girls from religious minority communities in Pakistan.

This issue cannot be viewed in isolation.

It is deeply linked to systemic discrimination embedded in the country's legal framework, social structures, and crucially, its education system.

Pakistan's Constitution, in Article 22, clearly states that no individual attending an educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction or participate in religious activities not related to their own faith.

Yet, this principle is routinely violated. The introduction of the Single National Curriculum was presented by the government as a means of reducing educational disparities.

In practice, however, it has embedded a singular religious ideology throughout the education system, marginalising non-Muslim students and reinforcing a hierarchy of faith that directly undermines the rights of religious minorities.

These curricular changes do not remain confined to classrooms—they shape public attitudes and normalise exclusion.

Within this environment, young Hindu and Christian girls are particularly vulnerable.

Many are abducted, forcibly converted to Islam, and married off to men sometimes decades older than them.

This is not a phenomenon occurring in the shadows; it happens in full view of institutions that are either unwilling or unable to intervene.

Only last year, in Faisalabad, a ten-year-old Christian girl named Laiba was abducted by a man in his forties and forced into marriage after conversion.

Her family's search for justice was met not with legal support, but with indifference. In another case, Arzoo Raja, a 13-year-old Christian girl, was forcibly married to a much older man. The court initially upheld the marriage on the grounds of her religious conversion, ignoring her age and the circumstances of her disappearance.

These are not exceptional events; they are the product of a broader culture that accepts the subjugation of minority girls as an unfortunate norm.

This culture is reinforced from an early age through education.

Curricula and textbooks frequently promote religious superiority and gender stereotypes.

Girls are routinely depicted in limited domestic roles, and non-Muslim identities are either ignored or portrayed with suspicion.

This erasure of diversity in educational content not only undermines critical thinking and equality but helps create an environment where forced conversions can be rationalised or ignored.

Where discrimination is taught, persecution often follows. This is not merely a domestic issue.

The European Union has, since 2014, granted Pakistan preferential access to its market under the GSP+ trade arrangement, conditional on the country's adherence to international human rights conventions.

Yet serious concerns remain as to whether Pakistan intends to meet its obligations.

While trade has grown, progress on human rights—particularly in protecting religious minorities and women—remains minimal.

A rights-based approach to trade must mean more than the signing of conventions. It must translate into institutional reform, accountability, and protection for those most at risk.

The international community, and particularly the European Union as a key trade partner, should not turn away from these issues.

The GSP+ mechanism includes a monitoring process, but monitoring without consequence cannot protect vulnerable communities.

If the EU is serious about its human rights commitments, it must ensure that economic partnerships are not maintained at the expense of human dignity.

What we are witnessing is not only the violation of individual rights, but the failure of a system to uphold the values it claims to represent. Minority girls in Pakistan face threats to their identity, freedom, and security, not only from those who perpetrate these acts directly, but from the structures that allow them to continue unchecked.

Their education, their protection under the law, and their right to live free from coercion are all under threat.

We cannot speak of inclusive development or international partnership if these realities are ignored.

The issue of forced conversions and marriages is emblematic of deeper failures in Pakistan's education system and legal enforcement.

These are challenges that require more than statements—they require coordinated pressure, transparent evaluation, and the political will to insist on reform.

About the misuse of EU taxpayers' money to finance controversial school education programs

HRWF presentation at a side-event co-organized by CAP/ Liberté de conscience, Human Rights Without Frontiers and Global Human Rights Defence on 26 March 2025

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (27.03.2025) - Pakistan's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion for all Pakistani citizens. Yet, as Mr Jan Figel, former EU Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief has just told us, reality tells a different story.

Since 2014, the European Union has tried to help Pakistan improve its human rights record with trade incentives. A win-win proposal: the privileged access to the EU market in exchange of the ratification and implementation of 27 international conventions to improve human rights and the rule of law. This mechanism is known as the GSP+, the Generalised Scheme of Preferences.

In this framework, **Pakistan's products enter the EU market with 0% duties across approximately 2/3 of all EU tariff lines.**

From 2014 to 2022, Pakistan's exports to the EU almost doubled, from 8.3 billion EUR to almost 15 billion EUR.

For 10 years, Pakistan has been the winner in this operation and the EU has been the loser. Indeed, over the years, many parliamentary questions and resolutions have highlighted Pakistan's disregard for human rights and the lack of political will to prioritize its human rights record.

By accepting de facto this situation and by failing to sanction Pakistan's non-implementation of the GSP+, the EU has misused the money of the EU taxpayers and has lost its credibility as a commercial power guided by human values. Indeed, the list of persistent egregious human rights violations has remained unchanged for 10 years:

- the fabrication of blasphemy cases against Christians, Ahmadis and other religious minorities

- the sentencing to heavy prison terms and even the death penalty on such blasphemy charges
- the impunity of false accusations, acts of violence and mob violence against members of minority religious communities, places of worship and communal buildings
- the controversial funding of schools in an environment of religious extremism
- the persistence of madrassah religious schools, beacons of indoctrination and extremism, which are out of control of the state, etc.

The 2021 Single National Curriculum

The 2021 Single National Curriculum (SNC) in force in state schools has institutionalised religious bias, embedding Islamic teachings across core subjects and forcing non-Muslim students into an environment of indoctrination and exclusion.

The Curriculum in force in state schools drew strong criticisms from education experts and human rights defenders for its lack of inclusivity, the over-emphasis on Islamic religious content at the expense of religious minorities, the subliminal ideology of Islamic supremacy and poor pedagogy.

Alarmingly, in the province of Punjab, which has a bit more than 50% of the total Pakistani population, extremist religious clerics now hold power over curricula of state schools, censoring content and restricting academic freedom.

The persecution of open-minded teaching staff

In October 2023, Islamic clerics forced a college professor to publicly renounce teaching Charles Darwin's theory of evolution as against Islamic law. A video showing his academic recanting was posted on social media and got viral.

In May 2022, the car of that professor had already been attacked with a magnetic bomb, leaving him in a wheelchair for several months.

Such serious incidents orchestrated by extremist clerics and spread around in social media clearly pursue the objective to terrorize any teacher who would decide to support Darwin's theory of evolution rather than the Islamic theory of creationism. This is Inquisition.

The EU funding of Pakistan's questionable school education system

According to the 2024 Report "*Pakistan, Education System, Curriculum and EU Funding*" supported by several Members of the European Parliament, the money of European taxpayers of the 27 EU Member States has been misused to finance such questionable school education programs in Pakistan. The amount is enormous: between 100 and 150 million EUR from 2016 to 2024

The question is "Should European taxpayers finance a public education system the implementation of which largely remains in the hands of extremist Muslim clerics who terrorize broad-minded teachers and professors? Would European taxpayers and political

leaders accept that their State finances Muslim faith-based schools at home where Creationism would be taught?”

I think the answer is obvious and the conclusion of the European Union should be “Let us stop financing Pakistan’s school education system as long as...” but there is no such answer.

Maybe the various UN institutions financing school education in Pakistan should also strengthen their oversight to ensure that their financial assistance does not contribute directly or indirectly to religious indoctrination and Islamization.

In Brussels, the co-chair of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Dutch member of the European Parliament Bert-Jan Ruissen recently submitted a written question to the European Commission on this matter wondering if the EU funding “is not being used in Islamic madrassas.” In his answer the EU Commissioner failed to reply to this concern as well as the two following questions of MEP Ruissen that are worth quoting:

What mechanisms does the Commission have in place to determine which curricula have Islamic religious content that seeps into general subjects in state schools to which non-Muslim children may be exposed? NO ANSWER. And what restrictive measures or sanctions does the EU have at its disposal for such cases? NO ANSWER.

Does the Commission intend to make public any breaches of the provisions of the agreement signed with Pakistan, with a view to safeguarding the faith of non-Muslim children from any form of indoctrination in schools? If so, in what context and when will this be done. NO ANSWER.

[See HERE](#) the common full written statement of CAP/ Libert  de conscience and Human Rights Without Frontiers (25.02. 2025) submitted to the 58th Session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva

Three Ahmadi mosques attacked in Punjab within ten days

The authorities seem unable to resist the pressure and threats of the extremist organization Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan.

By Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (03.03.2025) - "Bitter Winter" devoted [a series of seven articles](#) to Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a violent political-religious Islamic organization that Pakistani authorities try unsuccessfully to contain, more often than not surrendering to its pressure. This is especially true when TLP threatens or demands action against the persecuted Ahmadiyya community.

In February three incidents happened in Punjab within ten days.

On February 11 in Lubbay, Sialkot district, police demolished the niche of an Ahmadiyya Muslim Mosque after detaining the local Ahmadiyya president. Community members had refused to carry out the act themselves.

On February 20, at 12:00 PM, as captured on the first video, a group associated with Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) entered Throoh Mandi, Pasrur tehsil, Sialkot district. The mob destroyed the minarets and arch of the local Ahmadiyya mosque, shouting slogans against the Ahmadis. Law enforcement officers were present but did not intervene. TLP members threatened to return to destroy the Ahmadi graveyard.

Mob action in Throoh Mandi. From X. <https://x.com/i/status/1894103805211340890>.

At Chak No. 20NP, district Rahim Yar Khan, TLP told the authorities that they should demolish the minarets of the Ahmadi mosque by February 23, failing which TLP would carry out the destruction itself. The authorities contacted the Ahmadiyya Community and told them that they would prevent any violent action. However on February 22 the same authorities, intimidated by TLP, directly demolished the minaret and niche of the Ahmadi mosque, as shown in Video 2.

Ahmadi mosque vandalized in Rahim Yar Khan. From X. <https://x.com/i/status/1894135488761544814>

These incidents show that Pakistani authorities, unable to resist TLP pressure, are now actively supporting religious persecution. Extremist groups are shaping policy, and fundamental rights of religious minorities are being systematically dismantled, raising serious concerns about freedom of religion or belief in the country.

Side-event on "Human Rights in Pakistan"

organized on 26 March from 12:00 to 13:00 at the UN in Geneva by CAP/ Liberté de conscience & Human Rights Without Frontiers.

Keynote Speaker: Jan Figel, EU Special Envoy for FORB (2016-2019)

For more information, contact w.fautre@hrwf.org

Pakistan's faith-based organizations among those hit by US funding freeze

In 2023, USAID disbursed \$43.79 billion in global assistance, supporting development efforts in over 130 countries

By **A. S. John**

[Christian Daily](#) (18.02.2025) - Yasir Talib was writing a project report at his office in Lahore on Jan. 27 when he received disturbing news: the research and advocacy organization where he worked would not renew his contract due to a funding freeze announced by the Trump administration.

Talib, project coordinator of the **Minority Leadership Development (MLD)** initiative at the Lahore-based **Center for Social Justice (CSJ)**, which was financially supported by the **National Endowment for Democracy (NED)**, was among 10 employees laid off "until further notice" following President Donald Trump's unexpected decision to pause all foreign aid and cut funding for organizations such as the **United States Agency for International Development (USAID)**.

"The **MLD project** was crucial as we were conducting consultations and **lobbying on important issues such as the legislation against forced conversions and establishing a proactive National Commission for Minority Rights**," Talib told Christian Daily International.

He said the sudden suspension of the project affected him and 10 other team members working in 10 districts.

"It's not just about my job; the project's suspension is a setback to all the hard work we have done in the last two years," Talib said.

CSJ Executive Director Peter Jacob could not be reached for comment.

Christian Daily International has learned that **NED was funding at least 22 organizations in Pakistan working in democracy, education, and minority rights advocacy, among others.**

Christians True Spirit (CTS), another non-governmental organization, has also been affected by Trump's decision to block funds.

"Several CTS projects, including **legal aid to vulnerable groups, healthcare, and education** that were being carried out with the financial support of the American government will likely be shelved for an indefinite period due to this funding pause," said Katherine Sapna, executive director of CTS.

Speaking to Christian Daily International, Sapna said several organizations in their network that worked in partnership with USAID and NED were forced to lay off staff and shut down projects due to the decision.

"Suspension of crucial programs, especially in healthcare, will put the lives of millions at risk," she warned.

Sapna added that organizations still operating on funds from other donors, including church bodies, were conducting internal assessments on how to sustain operations until the situation with U.S. funds became clearer.

"We are in panic mode! Our church donors are also very concerned, and though they have assured us they will try to fill in the funding gap, we are not sure yet how we will navigate through this crisis," she said.

Mohammad Dittal Kalhoro, executive director of the **Sindh Rural Support Organization, one of USAID's implementing partners in Sindh province**, said his organization was **forced to shut down all three of its U.S.-sponsored health initiatives**—two of which were in full swing, while the third had barely begun.

"This decision will undoubtedly have a highly negative impact, particularly in a country like Pakistan, where **numerous programs across various sectors relied on USAID funding**," Kalhoro said.

He added that **the suspension affects not only healthcare but also humanitarian assistance, refugee support, nutrition, education, energy, trade, economic growth, infrastructure, and climate change efforts.**

"We are among dozens of organizations that have already started firing or suspending employees since the end of January," he said.

According to media reports, **Trump's cuts have suspended \$845 million in funding for USAID projects in Pakistan.**

Among **the most significant suspended projects** is the **Integrated Health Systems Strengthening and Service Delivery Integrated Health System Program, an \$86 million initiative aimed at improving Pakistan's healthcare infrastructure.**

The Global Health Supply Chain Program, valued at \$52 million, was designed to ensure the **availability of essential medical supplies.**

In education, the Merit and Needs-Based Scholarship Program, worth \$30.7 million, was set to support underprivileged students pursuing higher education.

The Inclusive Democratic Processes and Governance, a \$15 million initiative, was intended **to enhance democratic governance and transparency.** The suspension has also affected development efforts in Pakistan's recently merged tribal areas.

The Merged Areas Governance Program for former Federally Administered Tribal Areas, valued at \$40.7 million, was improving governance and administrative systems.

Additionally, **the Building Peace in Pakistan program, worth \$9 million, aimed at fostering religious, ethnic, and political harmony, has been put on hold.**

The freeze has also halted the Pakistan Private Investment Initiative program, worth \$43.5 million, which was focused on generating employment opportunities.

One of the most critical projects affected is **the Mangla Dam Rehabilitation Project, a \$150 million initiative essential for Pakistan's energy and water security.**

The decision to suspend these aid programs is part of a broader restructuring of U.S. foreign assistance under Trump's "America First" policy.

USAID, established in 1961 under President John F. Kennedy, has long been a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy, **administering approximately 60% of the country's aid budget.** In the 2023 fiscal year alone, **USAID disbursed \$43.79 billion in global assistance, supporting development efforts in over 130 countries.** It has garnered controversy, however, due to a number of projects that made headlines and were criticized as wasteful spending and overt support for progressive priorities.

Trump's administration is now seeking to consolidate USAID into the State Department, a move aimed at reducing government expenditure and redirecting funds toward domestic priorities.

Human rights progress needed to preserve Pakistan's trade privileges, EU says

By Ayaz Gul

[VOA](#) (31.01.2025) - The European Union is linking Pakistan's access to European trading markets as a duty-free exporter to progress on the country's "most pressing" human rights issues.

Olof Skoog, the EU's special human rights envoy, issued a warning Friday following a weeklong visit to the South Asian nation, where authorities have faced increasing accusations of suppressing civil liberties, political dissent, and free speech.

"The trade benefits under [the human rights development plan known as] GSP+ depend on the progress made on addressing a list of issues, including on human rights, and tangible reforms remain essential," a post-visit EU statement quoted Skoog as saying.

He referred to the Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus, commonly known as GSP+, which grants developing countries, including Pakistan, tariff-free access to the EU market in exchange for its adherence to specific human and labor rights obligations.

The EU statement noted that its envoy highlighted areas of concern during meetings with Pakistani leaders, including blasphemy laws, enforced disappearances, freedom of expression, media independence, impunity for rights violations, due process, fair trials, civic space, and the death penalty.

"As we approach the midterm of the current monitoring cycle, we encourage Pakistan to continue on its reform path as it prepares for reapplication under the upcoming new GSP+ regulation," Skoog stated.

The declaration noted that "Pakistan has become the largest beneficiary of GSP+" since the implementation of the trading plan in 2014, with Pakistani businesses increasing their exports to the EU market by 108%.

EU issues warning to Pakistan about human rights

By **Christian Daily International / Morning Star News**

Christian Daily (31.01.2025) - Pakistan's preferential trade status could be jeopardized if it does not address human rights concerns, including controversial blasphemy laws, forced marriages/conversions of minority girls and freedom of religion, a European Union (EU) delegation said on Friday (Jan. 31).

The delegation led by EU Special Representative on Human Rights Olof Skoog warned in a press statement that Pakistan should not take its Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) status for granted. The delegation noted that Pakistan's trade benefits depend on progress made in addressing concerns about human rights, which also include freedom of expression.

"As we approach the midterm of the current monitoring cycle, we encourage Pakistan to continue on its reform path as it prepares for reapplication under the upcoming new GSP+ regulation," the EU delegation stated. "The trade benefits under GSP+ depend on the progress made on addressing a list of issues, including on human rights, and tangible reforms remain essential."

It added that Pakistan remained a key partner for the EU in South Asia and that relations with the bloc were built on shared values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, guided by the principles of the U.N. Charter and international norms.

"The EU welcomes the fact that Pakistan has become the largest beneficiary of GSP+, with Pakistani businesses increasing their exports to the EU market by 108 percent since the launch of the trade scheme in 2014," the delegation stated.

The EU is Pakistan's second largest trading partner, with the GSP+ status allowing the country to enjoy duty-free or minimum duty on European exports. The scheme, however, is conditional on beneficiary countries demonstrating tangible progress in implementing 27 international conventions on human and labor rights, environmental protection, climate change and good governance.

According to the press statement, the EU mission, which is on a weeklong visit to Pakistan ahead of a key GSP+ monitoring mission in June, aimed to engage the country on the most pressing human rights and labor rights issues and discuss Pakistan's plans to address them, including the ongoing assessment under the GSP+ trade scheme.

The delegation met with senior officials, including Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, Chief of Army Staff Gen. Asim Munir, Minister of Law, Justice and Human Rights Azam Nazeer Tarar, Federal Minister of Commerce Jam Kamal, and

Foreign Secretary Amna Baloch. In those meetings Skoog highlighted application of blasphemy laws, women's rights, forced marriages and conversions, enforced disappearances, freedoms of expression, religion or belief, independence of media, impunity for rights violations, due process and the right to a fair trial, civic space, and the death penalty.

In a meeting with Chief Justice of Pakistan Yahya Afridi, the focus was on judicial backlog as well as the integrity and independence of the judiciary.

Throughout Skoog's visit, the special envoy acknowledged the important role of the National Commission of Human Rights (NCHR) and underlined the need to preserve its independence, the statement added.

"In the context of the upcoming GSP+ monitoring mission, the special envoy encouraged Pakistani authorities to ensure the implementation of all relevant international conventions," the EU delegation stated.

Skoog also visited Lahore to meet with Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif and Minister for Minorities Affairs in Punjab, Sardar Ramesh Singh Arora and representatives of the Christian and Ahmadi communities. Discussions centered on freedom of religion or belief, the protection of minority rights, and accountability for violations and abuses of human rights.

None of the four Christian lawmakers in the Punjab Assembly, however, were invited to the meetings with the visiting EU delegation, Christian Daily International-Morning Star News learned.

"Neither the EU mission in Pakistan nor the Pakistan government informed us about the delegation's visit," said a Christian lawmaker who requested anonymity for fear of backlash. "We don't even know which Christian representatives were chosen to meet with Ambassador Skoog. It's quite obvious that the government handpicked those people who would tout the official narrative of 'all is well' and refrain from presenting the real picture."

The lawmaker said that they had conveyed their reservations to the EU mission and hoped that it would arrange their meeting with the delegation before the end of the visit.

Speaking to journalists in the federal capital Islamabad on Wednesday (Jan. 29), Skoog emphasized the EU's commitment to democracy, human rights and international humanitarian law.

"There are ongoing discussions about freedom of expression and media freedom in Pakistan," Skoog said.

He added that he wanted to use his mandate to foster direct engagement with countries, moving beyond standard formal dialogues to address core issues in the absence of a dedicated human rights dialogue at his level.

The EU's GSP+ framework, as detailed by Skoog, serves as a strong platform for collaboration on human rights, with Pakistan as a major beneficiary.

"The GSP+ is a significant economic boost, facilitating Pakistan to become the EU's largest export market, surpassing both China and the U.S.," the ambassador said.

He emphasized the substantial economic impact of nearly a billion dollars in tariff exemptions, underlining its importance to Pakistan's economy. The GSP+ framework demands adherence to international human rights obligations, and its scope extends

beyond labor conditions and child labor to encompass a broader range of human rights issues.

Foreign Office spokesperson Shafqat Ali Khan acknowledged the EU's warning at a weekly press briefing on Thursday (Jan. 30).

"The GSP+ status is just one aspect of the Pak-EU partnership," Khan said. "The visit of the EU's special envoy is also part of the routine."

Pakistan was awarded GSP+ status on Jan. 1, 2014 after the country ratified 27 international conventions and committed to implement them. The EU GSP+ serves as a special incentive arrangement to promote good governance and sustainable development by facilitating trade. The incentive grants Pakistan zero-rated or preferential tariffs on nearly 66 percent of tariff lines, enhancing the country's ability to export to the EU market.

GSP+ has proven to be pivotal for EU-Pakistan bilateral trade ties. From 2014 to 2022, Pakistan's exports to the EU increased by 108 percent, while imports from the EU increased by 65 percent and total trade volume increased from 8.3 billion euros in 2013 to 14.85 billion euros. Pakistan's garments, bedlinen, terry towels, hosiery, leather, sports and surgical goods and similar products enter the EU market availing the GSP+ concessions, according to the EU website.

"Don't take GSP+ for granted," says EU Envoy

By Absa Komal

[Dawn](#) (30.01.2025) - The focus of his visit is to engage with the government on pressing human rights issues and learn about Pakistan's plans to address them ahead of the upcoming GSP+ monitoring mission, due in June 2025.

Olof Skoog urges Pakistan not to try civilians in military courts, limit freedom of expression merely to protect individuals from criticism.

The envoy's insights will be crucial to securing continued access to the Generalised System of Preferences Plus (GSP+), given Pakistan's reliance on the scheme, which provides preferential access to EU markets.

The EU has previously [expressed concern](#) over the sentencing of protesters being tried over their role in the events of [May 9](#) — when riots broke out following the arrest of PTI founder Imran Khan.

In a statement issued after the announcement of sentences handed down by military courts, the EU said "these verdicts are seen as inconsistent with the obligations that Pakistan has undertaken under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)".

Talking to *Dawn*, Mr Skoog reiterated the same concerns, saying: "We have expressed [our] apprehensions and concerns about the use of military courts against civilians."

"I had that conversation and will continue having those conversations. Our view is that for civilians, there should be a civilian court system applicable... We have raised our concerns when there is an expansive use of military courts in response to

demonstrations,” he said, clarifying that this was their general stance and that he would not comment on individual cases.

Freedom of expression is another GSP+ condition, he said, even as journalists and opposition parties protested the passage of controversial amendments to the country’s cybercrime laws.

“This is happening while I am visiting the country... I have been discussing [this] with government officials. Our view is there should be very limited restrictions on freedom of expression,” Mr Skoog said.

“You can’t restrict freedom of expression just to protect the politicians, authorities or the system from being criticised, and these are the conversations we are having with Pakistan right now about where to draw the limits,” the special envoy said.

Mr Skoog said that the next round of the GSP+ scheme hinges upon what Pakistan does in terms of complying with the various international obligations they have made, adding that it “cannot be taken for granted that [GSP+] will be there for the next round”.

So far, the EU official has met Deputy PM Ishaq Dar, COAS Gen Asim Munir, CJP Yahya Afridi, law and commerce ministers, other officials, as well as civil society, media and human rights defenders.

“I have and I will use my visit to convey to the concerned authorities that I have heard from civil society in Pakistan, and they relate to the problems we have discussed: freedom of expression, labour rights, death penalty, and people lingering in jail with no trial and sentencing. Those are part of the issues that we raised with Pakistan,” Mr Skoog told *Dawn*.

More reading

[EU: Human rights progress needed to preserve Pakistan’s trade privileges](#)

Woman charged with desecrating Quran in Pakistan wins bail

[Christian Daily](#) (17.01.2025) - A Christian woman in Pakistan wrongly charged with blasphemy by a mosque leader won bail on Thursday (Jan. 16), her lawyer said.

Gojra Additional Sessions Judge Waseem Mubarik granted the bail to Shazia Younis, a 50-year-old Catholic mother of three children, in [the case](#) registered under Section 295-B of Pakistan’s controversial blasphemy statutes relating to desecration of the Quran, punishable by life in prison, said attorney Javed Sahotra.

“The judge accepted my arguments that the woman had been falsely accused of blasphemy by the complainant – the First Information Report [FIR] shows that there was no ill intent behind her act,” Sahotra told *Christian Daily International-Morning Star News*.

Sahotra said police had wrongly charged Younis because Section 295-B clearly requires a suspect to have “deliberately or intentionally” desecrated the Quran; intent must be shown for a blasphemy conviction.

“In this case, the complainant has admitted that Younis had unknowingly burned the holy pages along with waste paper,” he said. “Therefore, her act does not constitute a case under Section 295-B.”

The complainant did not witness the alleged incident, nor had police recovered any incriminating material from the woman’s possession, he added.

Sahotra said the judge ordered the release of Younis against surety bonds of 50,000 rupees (\$180 USD).

“Younis will be released from prison in a couple of days, after we get the court’s written verdict,” he said, adding that soon he would file an application for dismissal of the case against her.

Gojra Saddar police in Toba Tek Singh District, Punjab Province, arrested Younis on Dec. 21 on the complaint of Atta Ul Mustafa, prayer leader of a mosque in her village, Chak No. 180-GB Mongi Bangla.

Mustafa stated in the FIR that he was in a market on Dec. 21 when two local Muslims, Muhammad Imran and Rab Nawaz, informed him that the woman had set fire to books outside her doorstep.

“The material set ablaze included a book of *Islamiyat*, which contained Islamic scripture,” Mustafa stated in the FIR, claiming also that Younis had admitted desecrating the pages to him. “Shazia has hurt the religious sentiments of Muslims, and she should therefore be punished as per the relevant law.”

UNHRC Urges Amending Laws

Expressing alarm over an increase in false blasphemy accusations in Pakistan, the U.N. Human Rights Committee on Nov. 7 urged repeal or amending of the country’s harsh blasphemy laws.

The committee noted that false blasphemy accusations led to Islamist mob violence and recommended amending the laws in accordance with requirements of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

In its concluding observations of the committee’s second periodic report on Pakistan, it stated concern over sections 295 and 298 of the Pakistan Penal Code, which carry severe penalties, including the death penalty, and have a disproportionate impact on religious minorities.

“It is also concerned about the increasing number of persons incarcerated under blasphemy charges, the high number of blasphemy cases based on false accusations, violence against those accused of blasphemy, fostering vigilante justice, and allegations of entrapment of persons, in particular young persons, on accusations of on-line blasphemy under cybercrime laws,” the committee stated.

It emphasized ending use of cybercrime laws, such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, to prosecute and detain those accused of breaching blasphemy laws online. The committee also urged the government to investigate allegations of massive

abuse of blasphemy laws in connection with cybercrime laws and publish the results of the inquiries.

"[The committee] is also concerned about the chilling effect that criminal defamation laws, blasphemy, sedition and counter-terrorism laws, and other recently passed legislation have on the exercise of freedom of expression by journalists, activists, human rights defenders and members of ethnic and religious minorities," it stated.

Urging Pakistan to take all necessary measures to guarantee prompt and fair trials for all persons charged with blasphemy or other offenses against religion, the committee highlighted jail conditions, stating that it was "also concerned about reports of abuse of women prisoners, including sexual violence, and that individuals accused of blasphemy are often placed in solitary confinement for extended periods of time. It remains concerned about the widespread recourse to prolonged pretrial detention."

Pakistan ranked eighth on Open Doors' 2024 World Watch List of the most difficult places to be a Christian.

Two MEPs appeal to EU human rights envoy on behalf of persecuted Christians

An initiative of MEPs Bert-Jan Ruissen and Miriam Lexmann, co-chairs of the European Parliament's intergroup on religious freedom

[Nederlandse versie](#)

[SGP](#) (23.01.2025) - MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen (SGP) has urged the EU human rights envoy, Mr. Olov Skoog, to call particular attention to the difficult position of the Christian minority in the country during his visit to Pakistan. The EU envoy is visiting Pakistan later this month. Ruissen is making this appeal together with Slovak MEP Miriam Lexmann, in their capacity as co-chairs of the European Parliament's intergroup on religious freedom.

Ruissen: "The situation of Christians in the country is quite troublesome. I think, for example, of the very sad case of Shagufta Kiran, a Christian and mother of four children. She was sentenced to death under Pakistan's blasphemy laws. It is imperative that the EU envoy press for her, and others, to be released."

Christians are fiercely persecuted in predominantly Muslim Pakistan. The country ranks high on Open Doors' 2024 Christian persecution ranking. Alleged blasphemy is punishable by death. Moreover, many incidents are known in which angry crowds attack or even kill Christians and other religious minorities. Ruissen: "Keep in mind that Pakistan receives around 100 million euros a year in development aid from the European Union, in addition to contributions from individual member states.

There is no need for the EU to be cautious. The EU envoy can and should exert considerable pressure to protect Christians." The SGP MEP continued: "Less well known is that in Pakistan many Christian girls are kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam and then sold and married off to older men. Pakistani authorities rarely act against this, but the suffering is immense. The EU must not turn a blind eye on this."

In addition to development aid, the European Union has allocated about 100 to 150 million euros for Pakistani schools and teaching materials in recent years. Research shows that these EU-funded teaching materials actually encourage discrimination against Christians and other minorities. Ruissen and Lexmann also urge a review of these teaching materials.

The European Union has long supported global education initiatives overseas, including in Pakistan

EU funding for education in Pakistan sparks concerns over religious indoctrination

By Joseph Janssen

[EU TODAY](#) (08.01.2025) - In 2022, the EU allocated €10 million to Sindh province to strengthen provincial education policies, as part of broader funding under the EU Multi-Annual Indicative Programme 2021–2027.

While this financial assistance is aimed at improving educational standards and accessibility, recent concerns have emerged over the potential misuse of these funds, raising questions about transparency and accountability.

EU Funding for education in Pakistan and its Intent

The EU's financial support to Pakistan's education sector seeks to address critical challenges, including improving access to quality education and promoting equitable learning opportunities. The funding is part of the EU's broader commitment to supporting sustainable development goals, particularly those related to education. Sindh, one of Pakistan's most populous provinces, has historically struggled with low literacy rates, outdated infrastructure, and poor teacher training.

The €10 million allocated to Sindh was intended to strengthen the implementation of provincial education policies.

However, concerns have surfaced about how these funds are being utilized. Critics argue there is insufficient oversight to ensure that EU taxpayers' money is spent on improving secular education rather than supporting institutions that promote religious indoctrination.

Concerns Over Curriculum and Religious Content

Reports suggest that Pakistan's single national curriculum, applied in state and private schools, includes significant Islamic religious content across subjects such as Urdu, English, civic education, and history. This curriculum is mandatory even in schools

attended by non-Muslim children, raising concerns about the potential for religious indoctrination.

The inclusion of religious content in subjects unrelated to theology poses a particular challenge for non-Muslim students, who may be compelled to learn material that conflicts with their personal beliefs. This issue has sparked broader concerns about religious freedom and inclusivity within Pakistan's education system.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that EU funds are not being used to support Islamic madrassas, which are often criticized for focusing heavily on religious instruction at the expense of broader academic subjects.

While madrassas play an important role in providing education to underserved communities, they have also faced allegations of promoting sectarian ideologies.

According to the [New York Times \(Jan 3rd 2025\)](#) the madrassas represent a potential threat. The institutions have long been accused of contributing to violence and radicalization, supplying recruits for the Taliban, Al Qaeda and other militant groups.

Previously, in 2021, the NYT reported that "[Darul Uloom Haqqania madrassa](#), one of Pakistan's largest and oldest seminaries, has educated more Taliban leaders than any school in the world."

Questions to the European Commission

In light of these concerns, [Bert-Jan Ruissen](#), a member of the [European Conservatives and Reformists](#) (ECR) group in the European Parliament, [has submitted questions to the European Commission](#). He seeks clarity on the mechanisms in place to monitor the use of EU funds and ensure that they are not contributing to religious indoctrination.

Specifically, Ruissen has asked the Commission to outline any measures it employs to identify Islamic religious content that permeates general subjects in state schools. He has also inquired about restrictive measures or sanctions that the EU could impose in cases where breaches of funding agreements are identified.

Additionally, Ruissen has called on the Commission to commit to transparency by making public any violations of agreements with Pakistan. This would aim to safeguard the rights of non-Muslim children and ensure that education funded by the EU aligns with its principles of inclusivity and respect for diversity.

The Broader Implications

The concerns surrounding EU funding for education in Pakistan highlight the complexities of international development aid. While financial assistance can play a critical role in addressing systemic challenges, ensuring that funds are used appropriately is equally important.

The case also underscores the broader challenges of promoting religious freedom and pluralism in countries with deeply ingrained religious influences in education. The EU must strike a delicate balance between supporting Pakistan's development goals and upholding its own values of human rights and religious tolerance.

Moving Forward

The European Commission's response to Ruisen's questions will likely set the tone for future funding agreements with Pakistan and other countries facing similar challenges.

Enhanced monitoring mechanisms, stricter accountability measures, and greater transparency will be essential to ensure that EU funds achieve their intended goals without inadvertently supporting activities that undermine the principles of equality and inclusivity.

As the EU continues to support education initiatives worldwide, the situation in Pakistan serves as a reminder of the importance of vigilance, oversight, and a steadfast commitment to upholding the values that underpin international aid.

A long fight to keep a closer eye on madrasas unravels in Pakistan

In a deal with Islamist parties, Pakistan is abandoning a requirement that religious seminaries, long seen by Western officials as a potential threat, register with the government.

By Zia ur-Rehman

[New York Times](#) (03.01.2025) - They draw millions of poor Pakistani children with the simple promise of free education, meals and housing. For devout families, they offer Islamic learning rooted in ancient tradition.

But to the Pakistani government and Western counterterrorism officials, the religious seminaries known as madrasas also represent a potential threat. The institutions have long been accused of contributing to violence and radicalization, supplying recruits for the Taliban, Al Qaeda and other militant groups.

Now, Pakistan's Islamic schools are at the center of an intense political clash — one that jeopardizes years of hard-won progress toward bringing the seminaries under the government's regulatory umbrella.

The conflict goes back to 2019, when the government enacted a sweeping overhaul requiring madrasas to register with the Ministry of Education. The effort, meant to increase accountability for institutions that have historically operated with minimal state oversight, was strongly backed by Pakistan's military but faced vehement resistance from Islamist political parties.

In October 2024, the largest of those parties, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, secured a deal with the government to end the registration requirement. Under the agreement, madrasas would be registered as they had been before 2019, under a colonial-era law governing charitable, scientific and educational groups. That law provides little oversight of curriculums, activities or funding.

In exchange, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam agreed to support unrelated constitutional amendments on judicial appointments that had set off a firestorm of controversy.

Maulana Abdul Wasay, senator and leader of the Islamist party Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, addressing students at a graduation ceremony in Chaman, Pakistan, on Wednesday. Akhter Gulfam/EPA, via Shutterstock

As the end of the year approached, however, the government had still not implemented the change. It cited concerns that reverting to the older system could undermine counterterrorism efforts, weaken oversight and breach international commitments to combat money laundering and terrorism financing.

The delay triggered threats of anti-government protests in Islamabad, the capital, adding to the government's challenges amid frequent marches by supporters of Imran Khan, the ousted prime minister.

"We are firm on the agreed madrasa registration terms and will ensure they are upheld," Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the chief of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, warned in Parliament last month. "If the government deviates, the decision won't be made in Parliament, but on the streets."

Late last week, the government finally approved the new registration provision, allowing madrasas to choose between modern oversight and the colonial-era framework. The move, in effect, discards the 2019 efforts to reform religious schools in favor of short-term political stability.

When Pakistan was created 77 years ago, madrasas numbered in the dozens. They gained prominence and grew significantly in the 1980s, when U.S. and Arab funding transformed them into recruitment hubs for Islamic volunteers to fight Soviet forces in neighboring Afghanistan. Today, there are about 30,000 madrasas in Pakistan.

Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the chief of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, center, during a news conference in Dera Ismail Khan District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, last month. Saood Rehman/EPA, via Shutterstock

Many future Taliban leaders were educated in these institutions, where some teachers endorsed the anti-U.S. ideology of Al Qaeda.

Pakistan came under increased pressure to regulate the religious schools after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, said Abdur Rehman Shah, a madrasa affairs expert affiliated with Tongji University in Shanghai.

"The post-9/11 war on terror and events like the 2005 London bombings raised global concerns about the lack of effective madrasa monitoring," Mr. Shah said.

After militants attacked a military-run school in northwestern Pakistan in 2014, killing more than 145 people — mostly children — observation of madrasas became central to counterterrorism efforts. Security agencies used GPS to map the schools and carried out raids and interrogations targeting seminaries suspected of militant links, Mr. Shah said.

In 2019, the government established the new regulatory framework to curb Islamist parties' influence over the seminary boards that govern madrasas. More than 17,500 madrasas enrolling 2.2 million students were registered with the Ministry of Education, according to official data.

Registration streamlined visa processing for international students, as madrasas attracted increasing interest not only from the Pakistani diaspora but also from students in African and Southeast Asian countries.

However, many seminaries, particularly those aligned with Islamist parties, including the country's largest and most prominent ones, resisted integration into the formal system, citing fear of government interference in religious education.

After the government agreed last October to end the requirement for registration with the Ministry of Education, officials hesitated to move forward in part because of intensified scrutiny from the Financial Action Task Force, a global watchdog based in Paris.

At the graduation ceremony in Chaman on Wednesday. Akhter Gulfam/EPA, via Shutterstock

The task force had placed Pakistan on its "gray list" from deficiencies in combating money laundering and terrorism financing — a 2018 to 2022 for designation that often leads to reduced foreign investment and heightened financial oversight.

"F.A.T.F.'s main demand was a crackdown on terrorism financing, particularly targeting U.N.-designated individuals and entities, including their madrasas," said Sanaa Ahmed, an assistant professor of law at the University of Calgary who researches illicit financial flows and terrorism financing.

To comply with the task force's requirements, Pakistan in 2019 seized control of several madrasas linked to banned militant groups such as Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba.

But after more than two decades of increased examination of madrasas, education experts argue that the efforts overlook a deeper crisis: the country's struggling public education system, which fails to meet the needs of millions of children, particularly from low-income families.

Pakistan has the second-highest number of out-of-school children globally, with 22.8 million ages 5 to 16 not attending school — 44 percent of this age group, according to UNICEF.

Madrasas, supported by private donations, partly fill the gaps in the public system. For many poor families, they are the only viable option.

A boy studying the Quran in Balakot in 2019. Saiyna Bashir for The New York Times

One recent day, in a modest building in a low-income neighborhood in southern Pakistan, the air was filled with young voices reciting verses from the Quran.

Inside, hundreds of young men — some barely in their teens — sat cross-legged on woven mats. Their heads, covered with cotton-knit caps, were bowed over Islamic books, fingers tracing the Arabic script. Some were memorizing the holy verses.

Madrasas emphasize Islamic theology, often with sectarian leanings, and Arabic, a language not widely spoken in Pakistan. While not all of the schools are linked to militancy, many promote a narrow interpretation of Islam, emphasizing doctrinal purity and the defense of Islam against other faiths.

Critical thinking and open dialogue are not primary focuses. Madrasas' resistance to incorporating subjects like computer science or mathematics leaves graduates ill-equipped for the contemporary job market.

For many families, it is not poverty, but religious conviction, that drives them to enroll children in madrasas.

"I could send my children to private schools to study computers and science, but I'm sending them to a madrasa because I want them to study Islamic education," said Abdul Wahab, a real estate dealer in Karachi, in southern Pakistan.

A religious school student getting ready to mark the birth anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad in Karachi in 2021. Akhtar Soomro/Reuters

Like many devout people in Pakistan, Mr. Wahab believes that a child who memorizes the Quran will bring blessings to the family, including the promise of taking 10 others to paradise in the afterlife.

Despite concerns over radicalization, madrasa administrators say they are unfairly blamed for militancy. "There are many people who go to liberal schools and are radicalized," said Qari Shahid Gul, a teacher at a madrasa in Karachi.

He cited Saad Aziz, a graduate of a prestigious business school who was sentenced to death after confessing to involvement in several terrorist activities, including the killing of 45 members of the Ismaili sect of Shiite Islam.

"Terrorism must be curbed, but scapegoating madrasas is not the solution," Mr. Gul said.

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