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Muslims in Pakistan burn, beat Evangelist unconscious

Police decline to name suspects in attempted murder

By Brian MacDonald

Compass direct (13.12.2010) / HRWF (14.12.2010) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - An evangelist is still recovering from burns after six young Muslim men beat him with clubs and belts and set him on fire last month in a village near this Punjab Province city, the Christian told Compass.

Area Christians said they found the Rev. Wilson Augustine, 26, of Village No. 44-SB, unconscious with burns on his head, hand and arm on Nov. 22 near the bus stop of Village No. 101-NB on the outskirts of Sargodha.

Christian elders Austin Masih and Nadeem Samuel of nearby villages said that Augustine, who was ordained in a small Presbyterian church in Village No. 44-SB, was distributing pamphlets and proclaiming Christ door-to-door the previous day among Christian families of villages Nos. 79-NB, 98-NB, 99-NB, 96-NB and 101-NB some 25 kilometers (15 miles) southeast of Sargodha.

Rustam Masih, a Christian from Village No. 99-NB, told Compass that Augustine was going door-to-door in Village 96-NB when the sons of a powerful local land owner saw one of the pamphlets. Augustine later identified the six as Muhammad Usman Ghani, Muhammad Taha Khan, Talha Mehmood, Nisar Warriach, Zareen Cheema and Jamshaid Ali Ansari.

Aamir Masih, a Christian elder of the same village, said that the young Muslim men mistakenly regarded verses in the pamphlet describing the resurrection of Jesus as derogatory to Muhammad, the prophet of Islam.

"This angered the Muslim men, and they ordered Augustine to leave the village at once and stop preaching the gospel in Village 96-NB immediately or face the consequences," Masih said.

Augustine told Compass that he then left the village.

"I went to other villages to preach the gospel, but those Muslim men kept pursuing me everywhere I went, as they harbored a grudge against me for imparting the good news of the Holy Bible," he said.

Augustine said that the last stop of his evangelistic work was Village No. 101-NB, where he preached in a small, packed-mud church building that villagers said belonged to the United Protestant Church.

His father, Augustine Azhar, and mother, Musarat Bibi, said that when he finished his evangelistic work at about 10 p.m. he left for home on foot carrying a bag containing donations to him of 467 rupees (US\$5.50). He had to walk about 1.5 kilometers to reach the main bus stop at the highway to catch a bus for Sargodha.

He left village 101-NB singing hymns and reciting Psalms in the cold night air, but as he reached the bus stop riders on three motorcycles began to flash their headlight beams into his eyes and rev their engines, Augustine told Compass from his bed at home, where he was still recovering.

Though blinded by the headlights, Augustine recognized their voices as they hurled obscenities at him, he said. They cut their engines, and he was able to catch a glimpse of them before they started to beat him with clubs and belts, he said. They threw a cold liquid on him, he said, and lit a match box, setting him ablaze.

"After setting me on fire, they started thrashing me again," he said. "Because they were beating me with clubs the fire was extinguished, and they dragged me to some nearby shrubs. As they were dragging me I blanked out, and when I reopened my eyes, I was in the DHQ [District Headquarters Hospital] in Sargodha."

Christian laborers on their way to work the next morning said they found a pack of dogs wandering near the shrubs of the Village No. 101-NB bus stop, and as they followed them they found a hymnal, a Bible and the scattered, blood-stained pamphlets and bag that Augustine had carried while visiting their homes. Two of the Christians, Binyamin Masih of Village No. 101-NB and Nadeem Samuel of Village 79-NB, continued searching with dread that they would find Augustine, they said.

Samuel said that as he went deeper into the shrubbery he found Augustine lying with torn clothes in dried blood. They rushed him to the hospital and informed his family.

At DHQ Hospital Sargodha, Dr. Sikander Hayat Warriach said that the Christian was brought to the burn unit in critical condition, but that after four days of treatment he was discharged on Nov. 26.

Augustine's father told Compass that he reported the assault to the local police station, but the registrar was reluctant to file a case against the sons of the wealthy, powerful land owner. Azhar added that only after pressure from local Christian clergymen and politician Farrukh Tanvir Chaudhary of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance did Sub-Inspector Allah Ditta register a First Information Report (FIR No. 1135/10) for gang attack (sections 448/449) and attempted murder (337-H2) of Pakistan Penal Code.

Police still refused to name the suspects the victim identified, filing the FIR only against "six unidentified culprits," Augustine and his father Azhar said. A police representative told Compass that officers declined to register the case against the named men because it was dark and the Christian could be mistaken.

Azhar said, however, that police declined to name the suspects because they were bribed.

Christian elder Austin Masih said that Augustine preached fearlessly in the streets as well as at churches and Christian homes in area villages.

Pakistani Christian journalist Aftab Alexander Mughal receives UCIP Award

Minority Concern (25.11.2010) / HRWF (30.11.2010) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Pakistani Christian journalist Aftab Alexander Mughal has been awarded the "International Award for Excellence in Journalism 2010" by the Union of Catholic International Press (UCIP) whose international office is in Geneva, Switzerland. The award was made at the World Congress held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso from September 12 -19, 2010. This is Mr Mughal's second award from UCIP. His first one being the "Media in Your Country Award" which he received on the October 20, 1989 in Ruhpolding Germany.

Mr Mughal started his career as a journalist in 1979 and edited the monthly magazines "Nishan-e-Rah" and "Mashal." until 1985. Since then he worked as a freelance journalist on various national and international magazines newspapers and news agencies. His main area of interest is human rights, peace and religious freedom in Pakistan and since January 2006 he has been publishing "Minorities Concern of Pakistan." which is a monthly e-newsletter.

Pakistani Christian convicted of 'blasphemy' stoned in prison

Assault nearly kills 19-year-old incarcerated on false charge

By John Little

Compass Direct (25.11.2010) / HRWF (29.11.2010) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - Muslim inmates at a prison in northwest Punjab Province on Oct. 29 stoned a Christian wrongly convicted of "blasphemy" nearly to death, according to his father.

Imran Masih, a 19-year-old member of the Protestant Church of Pakistan, is still recovering in District Hospital Hazro, where he was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit the day of the assault.

"Imran Masih was brought to the hospital in a very serious condition," Dr. Sultan Malik told Compass. "He had lost a lot of blood. He was shifted to the ICU and is still under treatment."

Masih, a resident of Hazro near Attock, is expected to be released from the hospital next week.

He was working at a barbershop in July 2009 when the owner, Nadeem Haider, accused him of stealing 5,000 rupees (US\$60). Haider, who had been pressuring Masih to convert to Islam, had the Christian arrested, according to investigators.

Station House Officer Junaid Mirza of Hazro told prison investigators and Compass that Haider paid police to torture Masih.

"Inspector Jamal Khan [of Madina Town police station in Hazro] arrested Masih from his house, and Haider had paid Khan to severely torture Masih," Mirza told Compass. "When

Masih was presented at the session court, his father Basharat Masih appealed to the court, saying that his son was illegally detained and tortured.”

Justice Risalat Khawaja of Attock Session Court ordered a medical report, Mirza said.

“Haider and Khan then conspired together,” Mirza said, “and before the medical report could be presented, Khan turned a simple case of robbery into blasphemy, saying that Imran Masih had spoken against the holy prophet [Muhammad].”

Khawaja on Aug. 3 sentenced Masih to 10 years of prison under Pakistan’s blasphemy statutes, widely condemned internationally for their use against oppressed minorities to settle grudges. The maximum punishment for a genuine case of speaking ill of Muhammad would be death or life imprisonment.

“My son was threatened that if he talked to anyone, his family would be killed,” Masih’s father told News Asia channel. “I am a poor man, I cannot afford a lawyer to appeal at the High Court. I have been writing to higher authorities appealing to them to release my son.”

Zubair Malik, investigation officer on the prison inquiry commission looking into the assault on Masih, said that on Oct. 29 Masih was sitting outside his barrack after Friday prayers when a group of inmates pounced on him, yelling that he was a blasphemer and must be killed.

With rocks from fields within the prison premises, they tried to stone him to death as prison guards looked on, Malik said, stopping the assault only after Masih was nearly dead.

Police took him to District Hospital Hazro.

Haider last month told Basharat Masih that he would ensure that his son did not get out of prison alive, the elder Masih said, and therefore he suspects that Haider and Khan arranged the stoning. Basharat Masih said Khan and Haider have contacts in prison that could have orchestrated the assault.

Khan and Haider were not available for comment.

Protesters oppose pardon for Pakistani Christian

K.M. Chaudhry

AP (24.11.2010) / HRWF (25.11.2010) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - Around 250 hard-line Muslims staged a demonstration in the central Pakistani city of Lahore on Wednesday, warning the president not to pardon a Christian woman sentenced to death for insulting Islam.

They also denounced any attempt to change Pakistan's blasphemy law, which critics say is often misused to persecute Christians like Asia Bibi and other minorities. Her case has prompted outrage from human rights groups and a personal appeal from Pope Benedict XVI for her release.

But hard-line Islamic groups in Pakistan have pushed back and some have even threatened officials in the past who suggested reforming or repealing the blasphemy law. These groups have significant power since politicians from the major parties rely on them for votes.

"We are ready to sacrifice our life for the Prophet Muhammad," chanted protesters in Lahore - many of whom were students from Islamic seminaries in the city.

The rally was organized by the Movement for Protection of the Prophet's Honor, a group of hard-line Sunni Muslims that was formed in 2001 to oppose changes in the blasphemy law.

Bibi, a 45-year-old mother of five, has said she was falsely accused by a group of Muslim women angry at a dispute over whether they could share the same water bowl. She has been jailed in the eastern province of Punjab since her initial arrest 1 1/2 years ago.

A court sentenced her Nov. 8 to hang after convicting her of insulting the prophet.

It is the first time a woman has been condemned to death under Pakistan's blasphemy law, often criticized as being abused to inflame religious extremism and settle personal grudges.

Her lawyer has filed an appeal with a higher court in Lahore, but she could also be pardoned by the president.

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari has asked for a review of the facts of the case, raising the possibility of a presidential pardon.

One of the strongest defenders of Bibi has been Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab province, where Lahore is the capital. Wednesday's protest took place in front of the governor's office and the demonstrators railed against him and others calling for Bibi's release.

"We are here to tell them that we will not let it happen," said Masoodur Rehman, one of the leaders of the group that organized the rally. "Only the court should decide her fate." Minister for Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti, who is preparing the report for Zardari on the case, said Wednesday that he would deliver his recommendations on Thursday. Bhatti has said he is convinced Bibi is innocent.

Pakistan's Christians, who make up less than 5 percent of the Muslim-majority country's 175 million people, are frequently the targets of accusers invoking the blasphemy law.

Bhatti says "dozens" of people - both Muslims and minorities - are sentenced to death under the law each year, although higher courts in each case have prevented any executions.

Those accused of blasphemy also are often targeted with violence.

In July, two Christian brothers accused of blasphemy were gunned down as they left court hearing in Punjab's eastern city of Faisalabad.

Last year, a 19-year-old Christian accused of desecrating a Quran, Islam's holy book, was found dead in his jail cell in Sialkot, another town in Punjab. Officials said at the time that he had hanged himself, but Christian groups said he was murdered.

Bhatti has long campaigned against the blasphemy law, which was introduced by President Gen. Zia ul-Haq's military regime in the 1980s to win the support of hard-line religious groups. Hard-line Islamic groups threatened to behead Bhatti six months ago when he proposed changes to the law.

Bhatti said the government is considering calling a meeting of Islamic leaders, politicians, human rights organizations and representatives of minority groups to determine whether the law should be repealed or changed. He said he is dedicated to the effort despite danger to himself.

"I am not afraid of these threats," said Bhatti. "I am ready to sacrifice everything for the justice that I believe in."

Christian woman sentenced to death in Pakistan 'for blasphemy'

A Christian woman has been sentenced to hang in Pakistan after being convicted of defaming the Prophet Mohammed

By Rob Crilly and Aoun Sahi

The Telegraph (09.11.2010) / HRWF (12.11.2010) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - Asia Bibi, a 45-year-old mother-of-five, denies blasphemy and told investigators that she was being persecuted for her faith in a country where Christians face routine harassment and discrimination.

Christian groups and human rights campaigners condemned the verdict and called for the blasphemy laws to be repealed.

Her supporters say she will now appeal against the sentence handed down in a local court in the town of Sheikhpura, near Lahore, Pakistan.

Ashiq Masih, her husband, said he had not had the heart to break the news to two of their children.

"I haven't told two of my younger daughters about the court's decision," he said. "They asked me many times about their mother but I can't get the courage to tell them that the judge has sentenced their mother to capital punishment for a crime she never committed." Mrs Bibi has been held in prison since June last year.

The court heard she had been working as a farmhand in fields with other women, when she was asked to fetch drinking water.

Some of the other women – all Muslims – refused to drink the water as it had been brought by a Christian and was therefore "unclean", according to Mrs Bibi's evidence, sparking a row.

The incident was forgotten until a few days later when Mrs Bibi said she was set upon by a mob.

The police were called and took her to a police station for her own safety.

Shahzad Kamran, of the Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan, said: "The police were under pressure from this Muslim mob, including clerics, asking for Asia to be killed because she had spoken ill of the Prophet Mohammed.

"So after the police saved her life they then registered a blasphemy case against her." He added that she had been held in isolation for more than a year before being sentenced to death on Monday.

"The trial was clear," he said. "She was innocent and did not say those words." Earlier this year, Pakistan's internet service providers were ordered to block Facebook to prevent access to supposedly blasphemous images.

Human rights groups believe the law is often used to discriminate against religious minorities, such as the country's estimated three million Christians.

Although no one has ever been executed under Pakistan's blasphemy laws – most are freed on appeal – as many as 10 people are thought to have been murdered while on trial.

Ali Hasan Dayan, of Human Rights Watch, said the blasphemy laws were out of step with rights guaranteed under Pakistan's constitution and should be repealed.

"It's an obscene law," he said. "Essentially the blasphemy law is used as a tool of persecution and to settle other scores that are nothing to do with religion.

"It makes religious minorities particularly vulnerable because it's often used against them."

After fatwa, pastor in Pakistan beaten with bricks

Compass Direct (05.11.2010) / HRWF (10.11.2010) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - Muslim extremists in Islamabad on Monday (Nov. 1) beat with bricks and hockey sticks a Christian clergyman who is the subject of a fatwa demanding his death.

The Rev. Dr. Suleman Nasri Khan, a former fighter in Afghanistan before his conversion to Christianity in 2000, suffered a serious head injury, a hairline fracture in his arm and a broken bone in his left ankle in the assault by 10 Muslim extremists; he was able to identify two of them as Allama Atta-Ullah Attari and Allama Masaud Hussain.

The attack in Chashma, near Iqbal Town in Islamabad, followed Islamic scholar Allama Nawazish Ali's Oct. 25th fatwa (religious ruling) to kill Khan, pastor of Power of the Healing God's Church in the Kalupura area of Gujrat city. A mufti (Islamic scholar) and member of Dawat-e-Islami, which organizes studies of the Quran and Sunnah (sayings and deeds of Muhammad), Ali is authorized to issue fatwas.

Khan, 34, had relocated to a rented apartment in Islamabad after fleeing his home in Gujrat because of death threats against him and his family, he said. The fatwa, a religious order to be obeyed by all Muslims, was issued after Khan protested anti-Christian violence in Kalupura last month.

Muslim extremists who learned of his conversion had first attacked Khan in 2008 – killing his first child, 3-month old Sana Nasri Khan. He and wife Aster Nasri Khan escaped.

"During the Kalupura Christian colony attacks, once again it came into the attention of Muslim men that I was a converted Christian who had recanted Islam, deemed as humiliation of Islam by them," Khan said.

In this week's attack, Khan also sustained minor rib injuries and several minor cuts and bruises. He said the Muslim radicals pelted him with stones and bricks while others kicked him in the chest and stomach. They also tried to force him to recite Islam's creed for conversion; he refused.

On Monday night (Nov. 1) Khan had gone out to buy milk for a daughter born on July 19 – named after the daughter who was killed in 2008, Sana Nasri Khan – when during the wee hours of the night five unidentified Muslim extremists began kicking and pounding on the door.

“When my wife asked who they were, they replied, ‘We have learned that you have disgraced Islam by recanting, therefore we will set your house on fire,’” Khan told Compass. “When my wife told them that I was not at home, they left a letter threatening to torch the house and kill my whole family and ordered me to recant Christianity and embrace Islam.”

Khan had sold some of his clothes at a pawnshop in order to buy milk for the baby, as he has been financially supporting six Christian families from his congregation who are on a Muslim extremist hit list. Islamic militants have cordoned off parts of Kalupura, patrolling the area to find and kill the families of Allah Rakha Masih, Boota Masih, Khalid Rehmat, Murad Masih Gill, Tariq Murad Gill and Rashid Masih.

Often feeding her 5-month-old daughter water mixed with salt and sugar instead of milk or other supplements, Aster Nasri Khan said she was ready to die of starvation for the sake of Jesus and His church. Before her beaten husband was found, she said she had heard from neighbors that some Muslim men had left him unconscious on a roadside, thinking he was dead.

The Rev. Arif Masih of Power of the Healing God’s Church in Islamabad told Compass that he was stunned to find Khan unconscious in a pool of blood on the roadside. Saying he couldn’t go to police or a hospital out of fear that Muslims would level apostasy charges against Khan, Masih said he took him to the nearby private clinic of Dr. Naeem Iqbal Masih. Khan received medical treatment there while remaining unconscious for almost four hours, Masih said.

Born into a Muslim family, Khan had joined the now-defunct Islamic militant group Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, which later emerged as Jaish-e-Muhammad, fighting with them for eight and half years in Kashmir and Afghanistan.

While fighting in Afghanistan’s civil war in 2000, he said, he found a New Testament lying on the battlefield. He immediately threw it away, but a divine voice seemed to be extending an invitation to him, he said. When he later embraced Christ, he began preaching and studying – ending up with a doctorate in biblical theology from Punjab Theological Seminary in Kasur in 2005.

Upon learning of the Oct. 25 fatwa against him, Khan immediately left Gujrat for Islamabad, he said. He was living in hiding in Chashma near Iqbal Town when Muslims paid his landlord, Munir Masih, to reveal to them that Khan was living at his house as a tenant, he said. A young Christian whose name is withheld for security reasons informed Khan of the danger on Oct. 29, he said.

The young Christian told him that Munir Masih revealed his whereabouts to Allama Atta-Ullah Attari, a member of Dawat-e-Islami.

Khan said he confided to Christian friends about the dangers before him, and they devised a plan to hide his family in Bara Koh, a small town near Islamabad.

“But as I had sold and spent everything to help out Kalupura Christians,” he said, “I was penniless and therefore failed to move on and rent a house there.”

Pakistani Muslim tortures, accuses Christian who refused slavery

Compass Direct (29.10.2010) / HRWF (05.10.2010) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Muslim land owner in Pakistan this month subjected a 25-year-old Christian to burns and a series of humiliations, including falsely charging him with having sex with his own niece, because the Christian refused to work for him without pay.

Fayaz Masih is in jail with burns on his body after No. 115 Chitraan Wala village head Zafar Iqbal Ghuman and other villagers punished Masih for refusing to work as a slave in his fields, said the Rev. Yaqub Masih, a Pentecostal evangelist. The village is located in Nankana Sahib district, Punjab Province.

Sources said neither Fayaz Masih nor his family had taken any loans from Ghuman, and that they had no obligations to work off any debt for Ghuman as bonded laborers.

Yaqub Masih said the young man's refusal to work in Ghuman's fields infuriated the Muslim, who was accustomed to forcing Christians into slavery. He said Ghuman considered Masih's refusal an act of disobedience by a "choohra," the pejorative word for Christians in Pakistan.

On Oct. 3 Ghuman and 11 of his men abducted Masih from his home at gun-point and brought him to Ghuman's farmhouse, according to Yaqub Masih and Yousaf Gill, both of nearby village No. 118 Chour Muslim. Gill is a former councilor of Union Council No. 30, and Yaqub Masih is an ordained pastor waiting for his denomination to assign him a church.

Fayaz Masih's family members told Yaqub Masih that Ghuman was carrying a pistol, and that the 11 other men were brandishing rifles or carrying clubs, axes and bamboo sticks. They began beating Masih as they carried him away, calling him a choohra, Yaqub Masih said.

Gill said that Ghuman's farmhands tied Fayaz Masih's hands and legs and asked him once more if he would work in Ghuman's fields. When he again refused, Gill said, Ghuman summoned four barbers; three ran away, but he forced one, Muhammad Pervaiz, to shave Masih's head, eyebrows, half of his mustache and half of his beard.

After they had rubbed charcoal on Masih's face, Ghuman then announced that Masih had had relations with Masih's 18-year-old niece, Sumeera, and called for everyone in the village to punish him. He and his men placed Masih on a frail, one-eyed donkey, Yaqub Masih and Gill said, and a mob of Muslim men and children surrounded him – beating tins, dancing and singing door-to-door while shouting anti-Christian slogans, yelling obscenities at him and other Christians, and encouraging villagers to beat him with their shoes and fill his mouth with human waste, Yaqub Masih said.

Some threw kerosene on Masih and alternately set him on fire and extinguished the flames, Gill said. He added that Muslims made a garland of old shoes from a pile of garbage and put it around Masih's neck.

Yaqub Masih said the abuse became unbearable for the young man, and he collapsed and fell off the donkey.

Police ignore court

Masih's sister, Seema Bibi, told Compass that the accusation that Masih had had sex with her daughter Sumeera was utterly false. She said Ghuman made the allegation only to vent his fury at Masih for refusing to work for him.

Seema Bibi said that Ghuman told her daughter at gun-point to testify against Masih in court on Oct. 4. Sumeera surprised the Muslim land owner, however, saying under oath that Masih was innocent and that Ghuman had tried to force her to testify against her uncle. A judge ruled that Sumeera had not had illicit relations with Masih, and that therefore she was free to go home.

Her mother told Compass, however, that since then Ghuman has been issuing daily death threats to her family.

After Masih collapsed from the abuse, Yaqub Masih and Gill called local police. Police did not arrive until three hours later, at 3:30 p.m., they said, led by Deputy Superintendent of Police Shoiab Ahmed Kamboh and Inspector Muhammad Yaqub.

"They rebuked the Muslim villagers that they could have killed this Christian youth, and they told them to give him a bath at once and change his clothes, in order to reduce the evidence against them," Gill said.

Family members of Masih said Kamboh and Inspector Yaqub arrested some of the leading figures within the mob, but soon thereafter they received a call to release every Muslim. "Instead of taking the Muslim men into custody, they detained my brother, and he was taken to the police station," Seema Bibi said.

On Oct. 4 police sent Masih to District Headquarters Hospital Nankana Sahib for examination, where Dr. Naseer Ahmed directed Dr. Muhammad Shakeel to mention in the medical report how severely Ghuman and his farmhands had beaten him, Gill said. He said the medical report also stated that Masih had sustained burns and that his head, mustache, eyebrows and beard were shaved.

In spite of the court ruling that Masih had not had sex with his niece, police were coerced into registering a false charge of adultery under Article 376 of the Islamic statutes of the Pakistan Penal Code, First Information Report No. 361/10, at the Sangla Hill police station.

At press time Masih remained in Shiekhupura District Jail, said Gill. Gill also has received death threats from Ghuman, he said.

The 11 men who along with Ghuman abducted Masih and brought him to Ghuman's farmhouse, according to Masih's family, were Mehdi Hussain Shah and Maqsood Shah, armed with rifles; Muhammad Amin, Rana Saeed, Muhammad Osama and four others unidentified, all of them brandishing clubs; Muhammad Waqas, with an axe; and Ali Raza, bearing a bamboo stick and a club.

Violence against women and attacks on religious minorities on the rise in Pakistan

by Jibran Khan

AsiaNews (14.10.2010) / HRWF (19.10.2010) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - The cases of rape, and attacks on religious minorities in Pakistan are dramatically increasing, and 70% are in Punjab, according to Kashif Mazhar, vice-president of "Life for All". A phenomenon that has recently seen examples of great cruelty, in which the families of the victims are

afraid to seek justice. A 13 year old Christian girl, Kiran Nayyaz, was raped last year and had a child. Her father, Nayyaz Masih told AsiaNews: "I'm poor, working as a janitor at the school in Chak Jhumra. My daughter worked as a waitress, and I had complained before of being harassed. She was raped by a driver, Muahammad Yahweh, who then fled".

Joseph Francis, National Director of CLAAS (Center for Legal Aid Assistance) told AsiaNews, "Nayiaz Masih and his family came to us, in shock, they were even afraid to talk about this incident. We gave them refuge. Kiran had a baby, and together with the Justice and Peace Commission we are working to see they get justice. "

Instead Father Anwer Patras has confirmed to AsiaNews news of the kidnapping, rape and murder of a Christian girl of 12, Lubna Masih in Rawalpindi. The incident occurred on September 27 last. Lubna Masih studied at Presentation Convent. On leaving her home around 18:30, she was followed by a group of five young Muslim men who then forced her into a car and drove away. Lubna tried to resist and shouted, but no one helped her. Her captors took her in an Islamic cemetery, Dhoka Ellah Buksh, raped and murdered her, and then they threw her body on the street.

Her father, Saleem Masih, told AsiaNews, "I still can not believe it happened. Those responsible are protected by influential local politicians. Two organizations have contacted us, ensuring protection. But I still don't feel safe enough to report it". Father Amer Anwer added: "The family is terrified, they do not want to go to court, they are still in chock." The Commission for Justice and Peace, in a study on the phenomenon, has launched a number of proposals. First, that there are women police and officers responsible for human rights at all police stations, to deal with crimes against women. Then, the discriminatory laws against women must be amended, and, finally, a form of legal protection for women and children against domestic violence.

Muslim mob targets Christian, family in murder case

Villagers beat young man and his relatives, as well as burn their crops and press charges

By Walter Smith

Compass Direct (11.10.2010) / HRWF (11.10.2010) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - A young Christian has been jailed for nearly eight months and his family was attacked after a Muslim friend framed him for murder, he said.

Yassir Masih, 18, has been locked up at Sheikhpura District Jail since his arrest in late February. In an interview at Narang Mandi police station at that time, Masih said that on Feb. 17 his Muslim friend Muhammad Mubashir came to his house late at night and asked him to accompany him on "an urgent piece of work."

Residents of Pandori village in Sheikhpura district, Mubashir and Masih went to the home of Muhammad Imran, who was in love with the same girl as Mubashir; Masih said the two one-time friends often quarreled over her, with bitter enmity eventually developing between them.

"Being a friend, I went with him, reluctantly, and we soon arrived at the door of Muhammad Imran," Masih said. "Muhammad Mubashir knocked on the door, and as soon as Muhammad Imran opened the door, Muhammad Mubashir opened fire with his pistol, killing Muhammad Imran on the spot."

The gunfire awakened villagers, who gathered and began to search for the killer, Masih said. Frightened of the mob and not wanting to put his family in danger, Masih did not return home but fled with Mubashir. The two young men hid in a field of crops, where they decided to leave the village until passions cooled, he said. As Masih left the village, however, he was unaware that Mubashir had melted into the mob that was looking for the killer, he said.

"Later Muhammad Mubashir went to his house and slept in his warm bed that shivering cold winter night," Masih said.

The next day villagers discovered Masih was missing and therefore accused him of killing Imran, he said.

They didn't stop at that, said Khalid Gill, chief organizer for Punjab Province of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance. Gill said that in order to deprive the wealthy Christian family of their profitable strawberry, wheat, corn and other crops, Mubashir's father, Muhammad Gulfam, filed murder, arms possession and terrorism charges not only against Masih but also against his 50-year-old father Abid Masih, as well as brothers Khalid Masih, 30; Asif Masih, 23; Ashir Masih, 15; Faisal Masih, 13; and two others unnamed.

"Most of the Muslims in the area harbored jealousy against the prosperous Christian family," Gill pointed out, explaining why Gulfam also pressed charges against members of Yassir Masih's family.

Additionally, the angry villagers on Feb. 18 overran the property of Masih's grandfather, Rehmat Masih, where four of the late patriarch's sons lived; the mob beat women and children with clubs and looted appliances, clothes and other household items, Gill said.

"Nothing was left of use for the Christian family," Gill said.

He added that the villagers ransacked Yassir Masih's home and burned 20 acres of his fields on Feb. 18. The village comprises about 2,000 Muslim families and only 15 Christian homes, he said.

Officers from Narang Mandi police station arrested Yassir Masih later than month. He and his family members told officers that Mubashir shot Imran, but police listened only to the lies of the plaintiff, Masih said.

On Feb. 19 Yassir Masih's mother, Shamshad Bibi, went to the Narang Mandi police station to file a complaint against the Muslim villagers for attacking and looting their house and burning their crops, Gill said. Police filed a case against the attackers but so far no one has been arrested, and "all the Muslim leaders who instigated the Muslim mob to attack are still at large," Gill said.

At the same time, Narang Mandi police have arrested not only Yassir Masih but his brothers Ashir Masih and Asif Masih, 15 and 23 years old respectively, Gill said. While Yassir Masih has been incarcerated at Sheikhpura District Jail, Ashir Masih and Asif Masih were interrogated by Criminal Investigation Agency officers and have been kept at an undisclosed location since Feb. 18.

The accused Christian's father, Abid Masih, as well as Khalid Masih, were still in hiding at press time. Police exonerated young Faisal Masih of all charges on Sept.1. Gill said that the 13-year-old boy had moved to an undisclosed location.

Muslim mob attacks Christians in Gujrat

Compass Direct (27.09.2010) / HRWF (29.09.2010) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - A mob of Muslim extremists on Thursday (Sept. 23) shot at and beat dozens of Christians, including one cleared of "blasphemy" charges, in Punjab Province's Gujrat district, Christian leaders said.

The attack on Tariq Gill, exonerated of charges of blaspheming the Quran on Sept. 3, 2009, and on his father Murad Gill, his mother and the other Christian residents was the latest of more than 10 such assaults on the Christian colony of Mohalla Kalupura, Gujrat city, since Sept. 8, the Rev. Suleman Nasri Khan and Bishop Shamas Pervaiz told Compass.

About 40 Islamists – some shooting Kalashnikovs and pistols at homes and individuals on the street, others brandishing axes and clubs – beat some of the Christians so badly that they left them for dead, Pastor Khan said. So far, 10 families have been targeted for the attacks.

On Thursday (Sept. 23) the assailants ripped the clothing off of Gill's mother and dragged her nude through the streets, Pastor Khan said.

Among the Christians attacked on Thursday (Sept. 23) were Rashid Masih and his family, he said. The critically injured Masih and his family members, Gill and his parents, and the other injured Christians were initially rushed to Aziz Bhatti hospital in Gujrat, Pastor Khan said, and then transferred to Abdullah Hospital in nearby Lalla Musa to receive more advanced care.

"The injured Christians were under the observation of able doctors at Abdullah Hospital in Lalla Musa," Pastor Khan told Compass by telephone.

Bishop Pervaiz, central vice chairman of the Pakistan Interfaith Peace Council, said the mob was led by two members of the National Assembly, Meer Anjum and Farasat Dar, at the behest of a powerful member of the Punjab Assembly named Sheikh Islam. The three Muslim politicians were not immediately available for comment, but the Gujrat superintendent of police investigations, identified only as Hafeez, told Christian leaders they were respectable legislators who were innocent.

Also asserting that the three Muslim politicians were behind the violence, Pastor Khan said the assailants have vowed to mount an attack on Mohalla Kalupura similar to the Islamist assault on Gojra in 2009. On Aug. 1, 2009, an Islamic mob acting on a false rumor of blaspheming the Quran and whipped into frenzy by local imams attacked the Christian colony in Gojra, burning at least seven Christians to death, injuring 19 others, looting more than 100 houses and setting fire to 50 of them. The dead included women and children.

Bishop Pervaiz said the attackers in Gujrat have threatened to kill him, Pastor Khan and Bishop Yashua John and continue to roam the streets of Mohalla Kalupura looking for Christian residents to kill.

The Lorry Adda police station house officer (SHO), inspector Riaz Qaddar, has stated publicly that "no stone would be left unturned" to apprehend the gunmen, but the Christian leaders said he has refused to act.

"The SHO flatly denied indicting the Muslim mob and especially the Muslim legislators," said Pastor Khan, chairman of Power of God's Healing Ministry International Pakistan and national coordinator of Jesus' Victory Gospel Assembly of Pakistan.

Bishop Pervaiz said that besides the Christian accused of blasphemy, the attacks also may have been sparked by the election victory last year of an area Christian – who was slain a few days after taking office. Yaqoob Masih won the Tehsil Municipal Authority Gujrat election by a landslide, and a few days after he took office on Dec. 15, 2009, Muslim candidates running for the same office killed him, Bishop Pervaiz said.

He added that Lorry Adda police did not register a murder case at that time.

In the blasphemy case, Tariq Gill was falsely charged on Aug. 15, 2009 under Section 295-B of Pakistan's blasphemy laws for desecrating the Quran, but due to the intervention of Christian leaders, influential Muslim elders and police, he was exonerated of all allegations on Sept. 3, 2009, said Bishop Pervaiz, who is also chairman of the Council of Bishops and head of the National Churches in Pakistan.

"Muslim legislators Meer Anjum, Sheikh Islam and Farasat Dar had resentment against Murad Gill's family over this blasphemy row as well," said Bishop Pervaiz, "and now through these assaults, which are becoming more frequent and massive, emboldened Muslims have found a way to vent their fury."

The Christian leaders said they approached District Police Officer Afzaal Kausar about the attacks, and he sent the application for charges to Hafeez, the superintendent of police investigation in Gujrat.

"But he did not bother to watch the video we shot of the attack and shrugged off the matter," Pastor Khan said.

He said that Hafeez told them that Anjum, Dar and Islam were respectable legislators, "and without any investigation declared them innocent."

This afternoon Pastor Khan led a protest at the Islamabad National Press Club. He said more than 250 Christian protestors reached Islamabad despite an attempt by Inspector Qaddar of Lorry Adda police station to arrest them before they left the area.

"But the invisible hand of Almighty God helped us, and we safely made it to Islamabad," Pastor Khan said. "Although the government has clamped a ban on all sorts of processions and demonstrations, we successfully staged the sit-in before National Press Club Islamabad."

Saying he regretted that the demonstration had drawn little attention, he added that the protestors would remain in front of the building tonight demanding justice. The pastor said tomorrow (Sept. 28) they would protest in front of the Islamabad Parliament House.

Muslims resume building on Christian graveyard in Pakistan

Hard-line cleric defies local officials' order to stop construction

By Walter Smith

Compass Direct New (01.09.2010) / HRWF (02.09.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net>
- Muslims led by a hard-line cleric on Friday (Aug. 27) resumed building on a Christian cemetery in Mandi Bhawaladin, desecrating more graves in spite of a local government order to halt construction, according to the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA).

Radical Muslim cleric Mirza Abdul Ghani had built a mosque on the Christian graveyard off New Rasool Road in Mandi Bhawalain after allegedly occupying the land 16 years ago, when area Christians were too intimidated to object, said Salamat Zia of APMA.

"No one could object to the construction of the mosque, as it is in the constitution of Pakistan that no religious worship place could be demolished," said Zia. "Therefore all the Christians remained silent then."

The cleric's alleged desecration of more of the graveyard land around the Masjid Ahle-Sunnat-Wal-Jamaat mosque began three months ago, Zia said.

"This Christian graveyard was earmarked before the Indo-Pakistan partition on Aug. 14, 1947," Zia added, "and their forefathers were buried there."

Zia, a local journalist and resident of the Muhalla Ghorra area in Mandi Bhawalain, said it initially appeared that Ghani's workers were building an addition to the mosque, as only pillars had been erected. Now Ghani's builders have completed a basement as well as possibly some shops, with cement plaster now being applied to the new units.

On Aug. 6 Zia led a seven-member Christian delegation intending to meet with District Coordination Officer (DCO) Muhammad Amin Chaudhary, another district officer named Syed Shahbaz Hussain Naqvi and District Police Officer Dar Ali Khatak of Mandi Bhawalain about the encroachments on the Christian graveyard and to discuss how the graves of their loved ones were being demolished and desecrated.

As DCO Chaudhary was on leave, Acting DCO Shahid Rana took their application and forwarded it to the District Officer of Revenue and Tehsil Officer of Regulations with directives to visit the site and demolish all encroachments except the Masjid Ahle-Sunnat-Wal-Jamaat mosque, Zia said.

After inspecting the site, the administrative officers issued directives to stop the illegal encroachments, and for a few days the construction was halted, he said.

"But despite the stay orders of stopping construction, the Muslim men restarted construction over the Christian graves on August 27," Zia said.

Khalid Gill, chief organizer of APMA in Punjab Province, said that Muslim leaders threatened Christians who objected to the construction.

"They threatened that in case Christians protested against the resumption of construction they would also carry out a protest rally against Christians, and Muslim clerics said Christians would be responsible for the consequences," Gill said.

APMA has demanded that the government allocate land for a Christian graveyard equivalent to the area allegedly occupied by the Muslims.

Local Urdu-language dailies in Mandi Bhawalain have publicized the alleged encroachment on the Christian graveyard.

Rapes of Christian girls in Pakistan reflect hidden trend

Sexual assault by Muslim extremists is commonplace but rarely reported

By John Little and Walter Smith

Compass Direct New (16.08.2010) / HRWF (16.08.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net>
- The vulnerability of Christian girls to sexual assault in Pakistani society emerged again last month as a Muslim landowner allegedly targeted a 16-year-old and a gang of madrassa (Islamic school) students allegedly abused a 12-year-old in Punjab Province.

In Farooqabad, Shiekhupura district, three Muslim co-workers of a Christian man allegedly raped his 16-year-old daughter at gunpoint the night of July 21; the following evening in Gujar Khan, Rawalpindi district, more than a half dozen madrassa students decided to "teach these Christians a lesson" by allegedly gang-raping the 12-year-old girl.

The students at Jamia Islamia Madrassa had been harassing Christians in the villages around Gujar Khan, said the pastor of the church to which the girl's family belongs, United Pentecostal Church.

"They openly announce that 'the Christians are our enemies, we should not talk to them, eat with them or do business with them,'" Pastor Shakeel Javed told Compass.

The students often beat Christian children who come to play on the school grounds, telling them to convert or leave, he said, adding that on Sundays they throw stones at the church building.

A school teacher who said she was witness to the alleged rape told Compass that when she came across the madrassa students the evening of July 22, she overheard one saying, "We will teach these Christians a lesson they will never forget."

"Three or four Christian girls were washing dishes near a pond," Rana Aftab said. "These guys ran towards them, and the girls started running. One of them fell on the ground, and these madrassa students got hold of her and took her in the fields. I tried to stop them, but they were 15-16 in number."

Seven or eight of them raped the girl, whose name is withheld, while the others looked on, Aftab said.

"She kept yelling for help, but no one heard her cries," Aftab said.

They left the girl in the field, and some villages took her home to her father, Pervaiz Masih, Aftab said.

Masih was devastated, and the girl's mother fainted when she saw her, Masih told Compass.

Masih and Aftab went to the police station to register a complaint, but the officer in charge refused to register it, Aftab said.

When Compass contacted officers at the police station, they initially refused to comment, but eventually one admitted that they are under pressure from Muslims leaders and extremists to refrain from filing a First Information Report (FIR) on the alleged crime.

Kidnapped

In eastern Punjab Province's Farooqabad, the Christian father of the allegedly raped 16-year-old girl said he was later kidnapped and tortured.

In his complaint to police, Ghafoor Masih of Kot Sandha village said he was working the fields when three men who work for his Muslim employer overpowered his daughter at home and dragged her into one of the rooms of the house at gunpoint.

His daughter, whose name is withheld, told police that the three men raped her while keeping her from screaming for help by threatening to shoot her in the forehead with a pistol. The family accused Rashid Ali, another Muslim identified only as Maan son of Muhammad Boota and an unidentified man who also worked for Masih's employer, Hajji Rashid Jutt.

The next morning, July 22, Masih went to the Saddr police station in Farooqabad, but Station House Officer Inspector Nasseer Ahmad Khan refused to register a First Information Report (FIR), labor leaders said. Aslam Pervaiz Sahotra, chairman of the Bonded Labor Front, and Zia-ud-Din Khokhar, chairman of Equality for Minorities, later approached the Shiekhupura district police officer with Masih's complaint, and on July 28 the official sent an application for a FIR to Saddr Police Station.

Under pressure from the superior officer, on July 29, Inspector Khan registered the FIR under for "gang rape at gunpoint", family members and clergy said.

As Masih made his way home after the filing of the FIR on July 29, however, two other Muslims who work for his employer, Jutt, allegedly intercepted and kidnapped him, the family members said, and took him to Jutt's farmhouse. There Jutt, the two men - Muhammad Irfan and Muhammad Usman - and another worker for Jutt, Fazal Karim, allegedly shackled and tortured Masih, leaving him in critical condition.

Inspector Khan told Compass that he has arrested Jutt, Irfan and Usman for kidnapping, as well as the suspect identified only as Maan for the alleged rape of Masih's daughter.

Joseph Francis, national director of the Center for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement, condemned the alleged rape of the 16-year-old girl.

"Muslim landowners and their relatives see Christian girls or women as their chattel," Francis said. "Such vicious incidents are not being stopped by the government, and day by day the rate of rapes of Christian girls is escalating instead of plunging."

.Sahotra and Khokhar added that many such cases go unreported as impoverished Christian families often do not have the resources to pursue justice.

Christians take to the streets on 'Black Day' to protest blasphemy

Asia News (12.08.2010) / HRWF (16.08.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Christians and human rights groups marched and protested yesterday against discriminatory laws, demanding freedom and dignity for all, irrespective of religion.

Christians in Pakistan observed a 'Black Day' of protest yesterday to mark the many discriminations they endure in their homeland, above all the blasphemy law, which continues to inflict suffering on its victims.

On 11 August 1947, three days before Pakistan became independent after centuries of British colonial rule, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of the nation, delivered an historic speech to the newly-formed constituent assembly in which he pledged "freedom and equality" for all faiths in the new country.

Christians from various backgrounds have chosen that date for its symbolic value. Likewise, Human Rights Focus Pakistan (HRFP) organised the protest march on this day, ending in a press conference at the Lahore Press Club.

HRFP president Naveed Walter said that the 'Black Day' of protest was called to highlight the "increasing incidents of injustice and discrimination" against Pakistani Christians.

Above all, the rally was prompted by the need to change the blasphemy law, which punishes proselytising but is used by Muslim extremist groups against Christians, aided and abetted by eager police officers ready to arrest on simple verbal accusations.

In addition, Naveed called for changes to Pakistan's electoral system to enable the country's religious minorities to select directly their representatives in the federal parliament and regional assemblies. Under current rules, a number of seats are reserved for them at both level of government, but they go to people who are handpicked by political parties and thus do not depend on the ballots of minority voters.

This year, Pakistan again observed 'Minority Day' on 11 August. However, for Nazir S. Bhatti, a leader of the Pakistan Christian Congress, it makes little sense to celebrate 'Minority Day' as long as Christians are persecuted, arrested and subjected to violence for their faith. Instead, he chose to observe a 'Black Day' in memory of the victims of anti-minority persecution.

Christians narrowly escape flying bullets in Pakistan

Evangelistic team cheats death; separately, stray gunshot leads to false charges

By John Little

Compass Direct (15.07.2010) / HRWF (16.07.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Suspected Islamic extremists fired bullets into the car of a Christian evangelist with impunity last month, while in another Punjab Province town stray gunfire led to two Christians being falsely accused of murder.

Following a youth revival in Essa Nagri, near Faisalabad, the Rev. Kamran Pervaiz, a guest speaker from Rawalpindi, was in the passenger seat of a Toyota Corolla returning to Faisalabad with his team on June 25 when 12 armed men tried to stop their car, the pastor said.

Pastor Naeem Joseph, an organizer of the revival, was leading the ministry team by motorbike, and he led them past the armed men as they reached the Narawala Road bypass at about 1:15 a.m.

"I didn't stop," Pastor Joseph told Compass. "A gunshot was fired at me, but it missed, and instead of going straight I turned right towards the Sudhar bypass and took the motorbike into the fields."

Pervaiz Sohtra was driving the car.

"Rev. Kamran asked me to increase the speed," Sohtra said. "The armed men shouted to stop and directly fired at the car. I saw from the rearview mirror that they were coming after us, and I told everyone to stay down."

The rear window suddenly broke to pieces as bullets pierced the car.

"Pervaiz [Sohtra] turned off the lights and took the car into the fields and turned off the engine," Kamran Pervaiz said. "The attackers drove by, near the road, without noticing the fields. No one was injured. We were all safe."

Pervaiz said he was certain that they were targeted because of their involvement in the Christian revival meeting; response to Pervaiz's preaching jumped when a crippled man was healed after the evangelist prayed for him at the event. Muslim groups had warned the Christians to abort the meeting after banners and posters were displayed across Essa Nagri.

"A local Muslim group tore the banners and threatened us, telling us not to organize the meeting or else we would face dire consequences," said Salman John, one of the organizers.

A police patrol responded to the ministry team's emergency number phone call, reaching them in the field shortly before 2 a.m. and escorting Pervaiz and the others in their bullet-damaged car to Model Town, Faisalabad.

Pastor Joseph filed an application for a First Information Report (FIR) at Ghulam Muhammad Abad police station in Faisalabad. Acting Superintendent Shabir Muhammad took the application but declined to register an FIR due to pressure from local Muslim groups, he said.

"I am trying to register the FIR, but the things are out of my control at higher levels," Muhammad told Compass.

False Arrest

In Gujrat, by contrast, police soon arrested two young Christian men after shots fired into the air by a drunken man killed a neighbor.

Cousins Saleem Masih, 22, and John Masih, 23, were falsely accused of robbery as well as murder, a later police investigation found, and they were released. Both worked at the farm of Chaudhry Ashraf Gondal, who became inebriated along with friend Chaudhry Farhan on June 18, according to Riaz Masih, father of Saleem Masih.

"They were feasting and then got drunk and started firing gunshots into the air for fun, and one of the bullets hit a passer-by near their home, and he died on the spot," Riaz Masih said.

Yousaf Masih, father of John Masih, told Compass that when police arrived, Ashraf Gondal "gave them some money and asked them to take care of the matter."

On June 22, police went to Yousaf Masih's house asking for Saleem and John Masih. When Yousaf Masih said they were at work and asked if everything was alright, the inspector told him that the two young men had robbed and murdered shopkeeper Malik Sajid on June 18 at about 11:30 p.m.

"My son and Saleem came home around 6 p.m. and they didn't go out after that," Yousaf Masih told the officers. "On June 18 they were at home – they didn't go out, so how could they murder Sajid?"

Police went to Ashraf Gondal's farm and arrested the two young Christians. When police told Ashraf Gondal that they had robbed and murdered Sajid, he replied that they were capable of such a crime as they often asked him for advances on their pay and "they even sell alcohol." Alcohol is illegal for Muslims in Pakistan and can be sold only by non-Muslims with a license.

Riaz Masih said he and Yousaf Masih rushed to Ashraf Gondal for help, but that he spoke harshly to them, saying, "Your sons have robbed and murdered an innocent person, and they even sell alcohol. Why should I help criminals, and especially Christian criminals?"

The two fathers went to the police station, where the Station House Officer (SHO) refused to allow them to meet with their sons. They went to Pastor Zaheer Latif.

"I've known Saleem and John since they were small kids, and they could never rob or murder anyone," Pastor Latif told Compass. "They were targeted because they are Christians. The SHO and Ashraf knew that these boys would not be able to prove themselves innocent."

The pastor referred the fathers to the senior superintendent of police operations officer Raon Irfan, who undertook an investigation. When he spoke with Ashraf Gondal, Irfan said, the landowner denied that Farhan had visited him on June 18.

"I have read the inquiry report by the SHO," Irfan told Compass. "I am aware of the fact that this SHO is a corrupt person, and it is clearly a false report."

Irfan said that, after talking with villagers, he concluded that Farhan was with Ashraf Gondal in Gujrat on June 18, and that they shot into the air for fun and one of the bullets killed Sajid.

"Ashraf bribed the SHO to arrest someone else and file charges of robbery and murder," Irfan said. "Ashraf is an influential person, and he told the SHO to file the case against Saleem and John, as they are Christians and would not be able to prove themselves innocent."

Advocacy group Peace Pakistan filed an appeal of the false charges with the Gujrat Session Court on June 25. In light of Irfan's report, Session Judge Muhammad Gulfam Malik on June 27 released Saleem Masih and John Masih and suspended the SHO for corruption and filing a false case.

No action, however, was taken against Ashraf Gondal or Farhan. Police have not arrested either of them

Militants killed two Christian brothers outside court on alleged blasphemy charges

By Aftab Alexander Mughal

Minorities Concerns of Pakistan (July 2010) / HRWF (16.08.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Two Pakistani Christian brothers, who were chained together, were gunned down by Rana Maqssod, a Muslim fanatic, when they left the court under police custody after a trial hearing in Faisalabad City, Punjab province, on July 19. The attacker is a young man who was covered in lawyer's uniform. In some areas of the city, clashes between Christians and Muslims ensued and at least ten persons were injured. A church was pelted by Muslim protestors with stones, causing extensive damage. The protestors also damaged some shops of both sides. At the evening of July 19, announcements were made from mosques in Waris Pura, a thickly populated Christian locality with some 100,000 Christians, in Faisalabad, demanding attacks on Christians. According to some reports, following the tension, police have lodged a case against around 800 Christians and Muslims. The funeral of deceased persons was held on July 20, early in the morning, so as to avoid further clashes.

Pastor Rashid Emmanuel, 32, and Sajid Emmanuel, 30, a graduate business student of Daud Nagar (adjacent colony of Waris Pura), Faisalabad, were allegedly accused under Pakistan's blasphemy laws' section 295-C Pakistan

Penal Code on charges of having written a pamphlet with blasphemous remarks about Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), yet the names and telephone numbers of the two brothers were listed on them. Rashid Emmanuel, a married man, was arrested on July 2 while his younger brother surrendered a couple of days later after the police talked to the local Christian leaders. The sub inspector summoned Atif Pagan to the police station and asked that he produce Rashid's young brother. For his protection, Pagan arranged for Sajid to be handed to the police in the presence of Catholic Bishop Joseph Coutts of Faisalabad, Asia Human Rights Commission's report says on July 14. According to a report, both brothers were put in a secret torcher cell where they were severely tortured by the police.

Muslim mob also marched July 10-11 in the city demanding the death penalty for both alleged blasphemers. They stoned Holy Rosary Catholic Church in Waris Pura. Mobs also tried to burn down the area where the Emmanuel brothers' house was located. The protesters chanted slogans, brandished weapons, and threatened to "teach a lesson" to the entire Christian community, a local Christian social worker Atif Jamil Pagan told Minorities Concern of Pakistan. The mob also threatened that if the brothers are not executed for allegedly blasphemy, according to blasphemy law, they will proceed to lynch them. Local Christians say that the allegation against them was fabricated and no evidence to support the charges against them. The Minorities Concern of Pakistan learned that the Christian brothers had a land dispute on a 5 marla plot with some Muslims in the area who threatened them with dire consequences.

'Blasphemy Laws' used to jail elderly Christian

Muslim vying for same piece of land as Christian accuses him of speaking ill of Muhammad

By Thomas Kelly

Compass Direct (29.06.2010) / HRWF (30.06.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Muslim vying with a Christian for a parcel of land here has accused the elderly man of "blaspheming" Islam's prophet Muhammad, which is punishable by death or life imprisonment, according to the Christian Lawyers' Foundation (CLF).

Jhumray police on June 19 arrested Rehmat Masih of village No. 165/RB Jandawali in Faisalabad district under Section 295-C of Pakistan's controversial "blasphemy laws," and he was sent to Faisalabad District Jail on judicial remand by Magistrate Muhammad Sajawal.

Section 295-C states that "whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) shall be punishable with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall be liable to fine."

Christian sources said Masih, who suffers from arthritis, is 85 years old, though the First Information Report against him lists his age as 73.

The CLF's Rai Navid Zafar Bhatti told Compass that hard-line Muslim Muhammad Sajjid Hameed filed the charges after learning that he would not be able to secure the Punjab Province land.

"He used the weapon of last resort, the controversial Blasphemy Laws' Section 295-C, which preponderantly unbalances the scales of justice," Bhatti said.

CLF President Khalid Gill said local Christian residents led by Masih had applied to the Punjab government to secure it for construction of a Christian residential area, and Hameed also had applied for the same parcel for commercial projects.

Hameed has testified in court that Masih made derogatory remarks about Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, and Khadija, the first wife of the founder of the religion, Bhatti said.

Gill said Masih has testified that he said nothing "humiliating" about Muhammad or Khadija.

"I am not a blasphemer, nor I can think of such a sinister thing, which is against the teachings of Christ," Masih testified, according to Gill.

A CLF fact-finding team found that in April the frail Masih had argued with Hameed and several other Muslim hardliners – Shahbaz Khalid, Afzaal Bashir, Muhammad Aamer, Akber Ali and Asghar Ali – about the Virgin Mary, said Gill.

"At that time the elderly Masih, who at present is languishing in Faisalabad District Jail and facing discriminatory behavior and apathy of Muslim inmates and jail wardens, did not know that this altercation with Muslim men would lead to imprisonment for him," Gill said.

Three of Hameed's friends who backed him during the argument, 25-year-old Aamer, 45-year-old Akber Ali and 40-year-old Asghar Ali, have testified in support of Hameed's accusation, according to Bhatti.

The CLF fact-finding team, led by Babu William Rose, a local Faisalabad Christian representative, found that Masih was also accused because he was a politically active member of the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam party (PML-Q), while Hameed supports the PML-Nawaz Sharif (PML-N).

Representatives of the National Commission for Justice and Peace also asserted that Masih's political views played a role in Hameed having him jailed under Pakistan's blasphemy statues, saying that Hameed was using the power of the PML-N, which rules Punjab province, to implicate Masih in the case.

Gill and Azher Kaleem of the CLF sternly condemned the incarceration of Masih and said that the blasphemy laws must be repealed at once as they are widely used to take vengeance in personal or land disputes.

Section 295-A of the blasphemy laws prohibits injuring or defiling places of worship and "acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class of citizens." Section 295-B makes willful desecration of the Quran or a use of its extract in a derogatory manner punishable with life imprisonment.

Masih is the father of seven adult daughters and four grown sons.

Christian professor in Pakistan beaten for refusing to convert

In another province, three eighth-grade students expelled for declining Islam

By John Little

Compass direct (25.06.2010) / HRWF (29.06.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Muslim students attacked a Christian professor at the University of Peshawar this month after he refused their demand to convert to Islam, the instructor told Compass.

Psychology professor Samuel John, a father of four who has been teaching at the university in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province for 12 years, said that as he came out of his house on the university campus at 8:30 a.m. on June 14, about 20 to 25 students rushed and assaulted him.

"I shouted for help, but no one came to help," he said.

When his wife learned what was happening, she ran to help him, but the students beat her as well. Both John and his wife were rushed to Lady Reading hospital, where they were treated for their injuries, with John listed in critical condition.

"I am still getting threats," the professor told Compass. "They say, 'Leave the university or accept Islam – if you don't convert, we will kill your family.'"

Police have refused to register a First Information Report on the incident, he said.

A group of five students had visited John on May 15, he said.

"They said, 'Professor, you are a good teacher and a good human being, please convert to Islam and we will provide you with everything you need,'" John said. "I was surprised and said, 'Why do you want me to convert? I am a Christian, and Jesus Christ is my Savior – He provides me with everything.'"

One of the students became angry, saying, "Don't forget that you are a family man," John said. "I said, 'I am not scared of anyone, God will protect me and my family.'"

He reported the matter to the dean of the University of Peshawar, but the official was unable to take any action because the Islamic students councils are supported by political parties and powerful Islamic groups, the professor said.

His family became worried, and other professors spoke of going on strike on John's behalf, demanding an apology from the students who threatened him.

"They said, 'This is a university, no one will be allowed to take the law in their hands – we are professors and teach everyone and do not discriminate by religion, caste, creed or color,'" John said.

But no action was taken against anyone. John subsequently faced various forms of harassment from different Islamic student groups who threw stones at his home, sent threatening letters and threatened his family over the phone, he said.

John had recently been honored with an award for best results in psychology at colleges throughout Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province. Muslim professors and Muslim student councils were upset that a Christian professor was getting so much attention, Christian sources said.

Students

Pressured

Separately, in Danna village in southern Punjab Province, Muslim administrators told three Christian students in the eighth grade to leave the school because they refused to convert to Islam.

A new teacher of Islamic Studies who came from another village to Government High School Danna urged students in his class, Sunil Masih, Shazia Masih and Nasir Naeem, to convert to Islam, according to the father of Sunil, Ejaz Masih.

The teacher, whom the parents declined to name, is also a Muslim leader.

"The teacher began by saying, 'Sunil, Shazia and Nasir, convert to Islam – it is the true religion, and you will go straight to heaven,'" Ejaz Masih said.

The students reported the pressure to their parents, who came to the school and complained to the principal.

The principal asked the teacher to explain the details of what happened, but other staff members at the school supported the new teacher, Masih said. On June 16, under pressure from other teachers, the principal told the parents to remove their children from the school unless they were willing to convert to Islam.

"We have been forced to leave the village," Masih said. "The police have refused to help us. We are helpless here."

Masih, along with Sohail Masih and Naeem Boota, parents of the other children, have fled the village with their families. Their children were the only Christian students at the school.

Christian woman kidnapped in Pakistan escapes

Impoverished father had received ultimatum from employer who loaned him money

By John Little

Compass direct (31.05.2010) / HRWF (01.06.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Christian woman who was kidnapped, forced to marry a Muslim farmer and told to convert to Islam amid a dispute over a loan said today she has returned home after weeks of "captivity and torture."

Sania James, 33, was kidnapped April 5 by armed men who stormed her parent's house in the small town of Rawat, just outside Rawalpindi, neighbors confirmed to Compass. The gunmen allegedly told her father that he would see his daughter again only if he paid off a loan of 250,000 rupees (US\$2,930) plus 30 percent interest – a rate much higher than previously agreed upon.

James said the armed men took her to farmer Mohammad Shahbaz Ali and forced her to marry him.

"I have been tortured, forced to convert and forcefully married," said James, who escaped earlier this month.

She refused to convert to Islam and was continuously tortured, James said without elaborating.

"One night I managed to escape and returned home," she said. "I have contacted Christian rights groups to help me."

Shahbaz Ali reacted angrily when asked about the alleged incidents.

"I refuse to say anything," he told Compass.

Neighbors who said they watched the kidnapping said they were unable to intervene.

"We have been warned by Shahbaz Ali that if any one tries to help these Christians, they will have to face dire consequences," said one of the neighbors, Mohammad Hamza. "Everyone is scared."

The kidnapping came five years after the woman's father, James Ayub, allegedly took the loan from Shahbaz Ali, his long-time employer, to pay for his oldest daughter's wedding.

Ayub, who worked at Shahbaz Ali's farm for two decades, was initially told that the interest rate on the loan would be 15 percent, but the rate was later doubled, family members said. Shahbaz Ali allegedly told Ayub in February that his family would be attacked unless he paid off the loan within two months.

In a bid to raise the money, Sania James said she had begun to work on the farm along with her elderly, impoverished father. James said that her father was "thrown out of the farm," and that she was subsequently kidnapped.

Local Pastor Faraz Samson, who tried to mediate in the conflict, said he went to Shahbaz Ali to end "the injustice, but he didn't listen."

Police officials reportedly said they were unable to halt the alleged kidnapping, saying Shahbaz Ali was a very influential man.

"I am shocked that a daughter of a poor man has been kidnapped, and the law can't do anything," Pastor Samson said.

The kidnapping was not an isolated incident, according to rights activists. They have expressed concerns that Christian women and girls have been kidnapped across Pakistan, a predominantly Muslim nation, often amid disputes over land and money.

Advocacy organizations Life for All and Peace Pakistan have condemned the incident.

Religious minority women, the forgotten victims of a fragmented society

Juliette Thibaud

AHRC (02.05.2010) / HRWF (06.05.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - At the crossing of the multiple divisions and fractures which fragment the Pakistani society, Christian, Hindu and Sikhs, women suffer one of the heaviest burdens of all the marginalized groups in Pakistan and are the unfortunate victims of both a male dominated society and a Muslim dominated country. Stories of violation of their fundamental rights are numerous and but most of them do not attract much attention, but those which are reported draw a clear pattern of the discrimination and violence they have to face, often powerless and lacking in resources.

The case of the 71 Dalit Meghwar families who chose to leave their houses and their ancestral village to protest against the abduction of a 15-year old girl, Daya, which was forcibly married to an influential Muslim man and converted to Islam is an emblematic case. According to the community, the abductors have threatened them not to alert the authorities nor seek any remedy to the situation to avoid seeing more girls being abducted. Fearing for the safety of the other girls of the community, the Meghwar families have chosen to migrate and to ask protection for their girls. They have settled down in the plains near Mithi Town and are now deprived of their source of income, food

and access to drinkable water, and remain in complete governmental indifference. (see pictures)

Most vulnerable among the most vulnerable, women have always been a target of choice for dominating majorities to weaken 'undesirable' minorities. Attacks against women from religious minorities should therefore not be considered as punctual, isolated and unrevealing cases. It is estimated that 20 to 25 Hindu girls are abducted each month and forcibly converted to Islam in Pakistan. The head of the Madressa, (Muslim Seminary) in Samaro, in which Daya was converted, has declared that 40,000 non Muslims had been converted to Islam so far in the Madressa. Through forced marriages and conversions, it is the whole structure of religious minority communities which is being targeted.

In front of all those hardships, religious minority women are particularly helpless and no mechanisms are designed to protect them. Cases of sexual abuses or of abductions of women from religious minorities, when they go reported, if they do, are only rarely addressed by the law enforcement authorities.

In a case documented by the Asian Human Rights Commission in March 2010, the family of a 17-year-old Hindu girl, Kastoori, who was kidnapped by three influential Muslim brothers and raped by one of them, was pressured into accepting her wedding to her rapist and her conversion to Islam by a jirga court (illegal tribal court). Court and police inaction went as far as arresting the victim's father under a fake case and intense pressures from ruling party members and local landlords prevent the family from seeking further assistance.

In another case, Miss Gomti, a 15 year old Hindu girl was abducted by the landlord her parents work for and got married to one of his peasants after being converted to Islam. When, after 6 weeks, her parents eventually managed to find out what had happened to her, they were only able to see her in presence of their landlord's employees, in the presence of which the young girl pressed her parents to convert to Islam. When presented with the wedding certificate of the young girl, her parents realised that her age has been falsified and registered as '19' to have the ceremony in conformity with the law which fixes the minimum age for marriage to 16 years of age.

In most of those cases, once the girls have been abducted, forcibly converted and married, the parents are not allowed to meet with their daughters and unable to learn about their whereabouts. After the marriage, the husband comes back to his normal life, comes back to his village, but what happens to the bride remains a mystery. Strong suspicions have arisen that after being converted, those girls may be trafficked and sold. Indeed, once the girl has been converted, married and theoretically integrated into the Muslim society, why would the husband be unable to give details about his bride's whereabouts and why would the bride seem to be unable to appear in public? Investigation into what has happened to those young girls is urgently required, but this would require a strong involvement of the state authorities which is yet to be seen.

At the highest level, the government response has been mostly marginal and reactive with no broad measures being designed to ensure the protection of religious minorities in general and of women in particular. It is true that measures have been taken by the State to ameliorate the plight of women in the country: the amendment of the Penal Code in November 2009 which penalises the harassment of women at any public or private workplace or the drafting of a bill criminalising domestic violence are two welcome steps for instance. Nevertheless those few positive achievements are highly unlikely to impact on the lives of the women of the religious minorities.

Indeed, extremely difficult access to the mechanisms put in place by the law prevents them from adequately providing the religious minority women with protection. Some international human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch while welcoming

the penalisation of sexual harassment noticed that the law did not provide the women with mechanisms to access the legal protection it made provision for. In a country in which flaws and corruption of the legal and penal system hampers its proper functioning, average citizens face difficulties to access legal remedies. Obviously being a woman and belonging to a religious minority further add difficulties to this obstacle course and leave the women without any remedy to protect themselves from daily abuses.

In the cases mentioned above, the local police have clearly shown their reluctance to investigate cases involving Madarssa (Muslim seminaries) and Muslim cleric and refused to provide the victims' family with assistance and protection. One case is particularly emblematic of the lack of cooperation of the state authorities in cases of abduction and forced conversions of young girls. In December 2009, Gajri, a 15-year-old Hindu girl was forcibly taken away from her house and converted to Islam. When her parents tried to file a First Information Report at the police station, the staff discouraged them from doing so. Later, a Madarssa informed the police station that the girl had embraced Islam and had married her neighbour. Nevertheless, the police failed to avert the family of this new piece of information and the parents only came to know this fact a few days later when they tried once again to file an FIR, which was again refused by the police staff. When the parents tried to file a case of abduction against their neighbour and the Madarssa, the district police officer refused to do so and made himself the advocate of the perpetrators by explaining that he had no power in matter of conversion, that the 15 year old girl was the property of the Madarssa and is reported to have said that Islam is a religion that could be entered and not exited.

Through this denial of justice, the state fails to fulfil its duty of protection of the safety of all citizens in cases which clearly constitutes violations of children's rights and freedom of religion as entrenched in international conventions such as the article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the article 30 of the Convention on the Rights to Child, both of which Pakistan is a party.

Lack of social and economic empowerment further deprives those women of protection. Recent surveys have revealed for instance that 87 per cent of scheduled caste Hindu women were illiterate compared to 63.5 per cent of males of their community, given that the national illiteracy rate among Pakistani women reaches 58%. The gap between the primary school enrolment rate of the scheduled castes women (10.2%) and the average rate (48% of Pakistani females) also tells much about the huge discrepancy existing between the opportunities offered to women from minority communities and Muslim women. There is no need to remind anyone here that a lot of Muslim women, as such, already face extremely high difficulties in accessing education and in obtaining equal socio-economic opportunities as men.

In urban areas, women from religious minorities are most often employed as manual scavengers or sanitary workers for insignificant wages. In rural areas, they sometimes handle small agricultural tasks such as picking of cotton and chillies for marginal wages, when their families are not trapped into the system of bonded labour. Moreover, when women manage to generate resources through those activities, their incomes are managed by the family head. Such practice further marginalizes women from economic empowerment and leads to a somehow paradoxical situation in which those handling the double-work load of low-paid manual labour in agriculture, domestic services or as manual scavenger and of unpaid domestic labour at home are those who benefit the least from the income they generate through it.

It has become a trite remark to assert that laws and regulations alone will not prevent violence against religious minority women in Pakistan but that a much deeper and stronger move is needed to transform the whole mindset of the society both toward the inadmissibility of violence against women and toward the respect of different creeds and beliefs.

Nevertheless there is a wide range of proactive measures which can and should be taken to encourage this transformation such as programmes promoting the education of religious minority girls, the restoration of health facilities in the religious minorities' area and the provision of micro-credit loans to women entrepreneurs to encourage their empowerment. A strong and deep move toward the eradication of bonded labour under which women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation from the landowner is also indispensable. The government of Pakistan, whose response has been limited and mostly retrospective, should fully tackle this issue and show strong commitment to the protection of women from religious minorities. The state should make sure that women vulnerable to abduction will not remain without protection and police officers who refuse to file a FIR in cases of rape and abduction involving religious minorities shall face sanctions.

Obviously, the government of Pakistan, the civil society and the international community all have a role to play in favour of the protection and the empowerment of religious minority women in Pakistan.

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About AHRC: The Asian Human Rights Commission is a regional non-governmental organisation monitoring and lobbying human rights issues in Asia. The Hong Kong-based group was founded in 1984.

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Pakistani Muslims severely beat, sodomize Christian barber

Brother of Muslim who insisted on having beard cut, seven others, break hair-cutter's bones

By Jawad Mazhar

Compass Direct (28.04.2010) / HRWF (29.04.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Christian barber in this Punjab Province city is still recovering from broken bones and other injuries sustained earlier this month after eight Muslims allegedly beat and sodomized him for cutting the beard of a Muslim.

Marwat Masih, 29, initially refused the request of 19-year-old Qandeel Cheema to cut his beard in Sargodha's Gulshan-e-Bashir town on April 13, knowing that area Sunni Muslims believe the Quran prohibits it. But Cheema, a high school student, told Masih that he had lived and studied in Lahore and therefore wanted a more modern look, the bed-ridden and feeble Masih told Compass.

"I refused to shave his beard, but he showed me his packed bags and said that he would leave the town straight after the shave, and so no one would ever know that I had shaved his beard," Masih said.

Eyewitnesses told Compass that as Masih was cutting Cheema's beard, the client's older brother – local radical Muslim land owner Shakeel Cheema – was returning by tractor

from his fields and, noting the family Jeep in front of the Marwat Hair Stylist shop, stopped in.

"When Shakeel Cheema saw me shaving his younger brother's beard, he became angry and started vandalizing mirrors, the sound system and chairs, and he desecrated a wooden cross perched on the top of the front mirrors," Masih said. "He also started beating my head with his shoes."

Eyewitnesses told Compass that Shakeel Cheema shouted orders to his companions to tie Masih up and throw him into the wagon attached to his tractor, and that he ordered his younger brother to leave for Lahore at once.

Masih said that he was blindfolded with a black cloth and taken to an unknown place where he was locked in a room. An hour later, Shakeel Cheema and seven others arrived and began striking him with clubs, breaking his ribs, a wrist and leg bones.

"Shakeel Cheema said, 'Now we are going to teach you a real lesson for shaving the beard of a Muslim man,'" Masih said, and after a long, pained pause he related how Cheema and the seven others sodomized him. "I started bleeding and fell unconscious."

His father, Laal Masih, older brother Hassrat Masih and other relatives had begun searching for him, and after midnight that night they found him lying half-naked and unconscious off the main street of Gulshan-e-Bashir town, his father told Compass. They immediately took him to Rural Health Centre, where doctors kept him under observation for two days and treated him for internal bleeding and the broken ribs, leg bones and wrist.

"We submitted an application to the Saddr police twice, but they took no action against Shakeel Cheema and his accomplices," Laal Masih said. The family is appealing to Christian ministers and parliamentarians for assistance.

Still receiving threats of harm if they do not leave the area, family members also said they cannot afford the fees of a standard physician and have resorted to help from lesser trained doctors.

Police have refused to file a First Information Report against Cheema and his accomplices, who all remained at large at press time.

A shopkeeper next to Masih's barbershop told Compass that the barber deserved the abuse.

"He deserves such punishment, as he did something that is forbidden according to the teaching of the Quran and the sunna [arabic word for the sayings or habits of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam]," said Muhammad Maqsood, who has a long, white beard. "Marwat Masih paid for his crime."

Masih's 36-year-old brother Hassrat Masih emphasized that Gulshan-e-Bashir town is inhabited mainly by radical Muslims.

"Therefore, almost all of them are against shaving, especially the beard," Hassrat Masih said. "Having a beard is seen as holy practice because it is a standard prescribed for all Muslims in the sunna, or teachings or actions of the prophet of Islam."

Young Christian woman allegedly abducted in Pakistan

Muslims said to employ various ruses; forced conversion, marriage feared

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (13.04.2010) / HRWF (14.04.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Muslim tricked a 19-year-old Christian woman into leaving her house here on April 1, and he and a car full of friends took her away, according to her family.

Sonia Mohan's family said they fear the Muslim, Ali Raza, will force her to convert to Islam and marry him. Raza came to their home in Lahore's Nishtar Colony claiming that her brother, Johnson Parvaiz, wanted to see her outside, Parvaiz said.

"Sonia would not have gone with them if he hadn't told her that I wanted to see her," Parvaiz said. "Ali Raza came to our home and told Sonia that I had asked for her, and she went out of the house with him. They had parked a vehicle outside and left, and afterwards we never heard from her."

He said his sister's cell phone remained off for two days. When it began to ring again they called repeatedly, and finally a man answered the phone and then handed it to Mohan. Parvaiz said she told him not to call her, that she was very happy and that they should not try to find her.

"It was obvious from her voice that she had been forced to say that," Parvaiz said. "I fear that she will first be converted to Islam, and then married, and then it will become impossible for us to see her again."

Initially police were unwilling to register the family's complaint, he said. Only after the family enlisted the help of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA) did police begin searching for Raza and Mohan.

Parvaiz added that Raza and his friends had previously told her to convert to Islam, saying that because she was beautiful she did not deserve to live as a lowly Christian. Raza and Mohan had no prior contact except that Raza had harassed his sister that one time, he said; her family complained to his parents, who live in the area.

Parvaiz added that Raza worked in a factory called Combined Fabrics, where he had a reputation of harassing Christian women. Since the alleged abduction he has been missing from work.

Nishtar Colony Station House Officer Munawar Doggar told Compass that it did not appear that Mohan, who along with the rest of her family belongs to the American Reformed Presbyterian Church, went with Raza willingly. He said he had delayed registering a case on behalf of Mohan's family only because Raza's family had filed a complaint that Raza himself had been abducted.

After speaking with Compass, however, Doggar said he would file a First Information Report imminently.

"I want to fully investigate the matter so that no injustice is done to any party," he said. "But the family of the girl should now come to the police station and surely their FIR will be registered."

On the day of the kidnapping, Raza's uncle, Zaffar Jamil, filed a complaint that Raza himself had been abducted as a smokescreen to delay police in pursuing the abduction of Mohan, Parvaiz said.

"In this way, the police would reject my police complaint, saying, 'Raza was abducted, so how could he abduct Sonia?'" Parvaiz said.

In his uncle Jamil's complaint to police, Jamil had said that two men identified only as Fahad and Almas – friends of Raza present in the waiting car when Raza allegedly kidnapped Mohan – were the ones who likely abducted Raza.

Compass has obtained a copy of Jamil's complaint. He crafted it in such a way that he can withdraw it at any point, and he says he had only a suspicion about the abduction of Raza and the identity of the supposed culprits. Otherwise police would quickly determine that Fahad and Almas had not abducted Raza, and the tactic to delay justice would be short-lived, Parvaiz said.

APMA Chief Organizer in Punjab Province Khalid Gill told Compass that previously Fahad had employed duplicitous tactics to marry a Christian woman in Youhanabad, Lahore, and that for that reason Raza had sought Fahad's help in tricking Mohan into going with him. Gill said that in such kidnapping cases, police often delay investigations until after abducted women get pregnant, after which legally it is nearly impossible for courts to return them to their families.

"That is the reason that APMA has been asking for revision of the family laws, and that in such cases where such tactics have been used, the marriage should be declared void so that the girl returns to the family and starts living her life from where it was interrupted," Gill said.

Jamil and Raza's brother, Nasir Dilawar, and Dilawar's wife Majidan, along with Raza's brother Muhammad Asif, have assured Mohan's family that she will be returned soon, but that promise also was only an attempt to forestall legal action, Parvaiz said.

He added that the fact that Raza and his accomplices felt it necessary to employ the ruses to delay police investigations was further evidence that Mohan and Raza had no prior relationship.

The family fears that the longer her return is delayed, the more likely that she will become pregnant or get intimidated into giving a statement in court that she went willingly due to her captors' threats that her father or brothers will be killed if she refuses, Parvaiz said.

False charges filed against 47 Christians in Pakistan

Police try to extract bribe after attacking home; in Rawalpindi, militants attack chapel

By Jawad Mazhar

Compass Direct (08.04.2010) / HRWF (09.04.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Police here filed false charges of alcohol possession against 47 Christians, including women and children, on March 28 in an attempt to intimidate and bribe them, Christian leaders said.

Police broke into and ransacked the home of Shaukat Masih at 10:15 p.m. on Palm Sunday, manhandled his wife Parveen Bibi, and threatened to charge them and 45 other area Christians with alcohol possession if they did not pay a bribe, said attorney Albert Patras. The Christians refused.

Those charged include two children and eight women. Patras said that three of the 37 Christian men, Shaukat Masih, Moula Masih and Shanni Masih, secured pre-arrest bail and thus averted detainment by Dane Wall police in Vehari, in Punjab Province. None of the others named in the First Information Report is being held either.

"Police are not interested in their arrest, instead they were trying to extort some money from the destitute Christians," Patras said. "Police thought that Christians, being a soft target, would readily be bribed to save their families, particularly their girls and women."

Non-Muslims with a permit are allowed to possess and drink alcohol in Pakistan, while alcohol is forbidden to Muslims in Pakistan. Shaukat Masih has a government permit to keep and drink alcohol, Patras said, thus making the possession charge baseless.

"No longer using just 'blasphemy' laws, police and fanatical Muslims have begun to use alcohol laws, Section 3/4 of the Pakistan Penal Code, to persecute the destitute Christians of Pakistan," Patras said. "Only Christians in Pakistan are allowed to keep and drink alcohol, so Pakistani police can apprehend any Christian and then level section 3/4 of PPC against him or her."

Patras, head of the Society for Empowerment of the People, told Compass that Sub-Inspector Irshaad-ur-Rehman of the Dane Wall police station, along with two other policemen illegally ransacked the house of Shaukat Masih and Sadiq Masih and threatened to file alcohol charges against them if they refused to pay the bribe.

Besides the alcohol accusations, police also filed charges against the Christians for interfering with police, attacking in the form of a mob, theft, confronting police and engaging in terrorist activities, Patras said.

Patras said that Rehman filed the false charges against the Christians only to protect himself and his cohorts against accusations over their attack on the household. Rehman was not immediately available for comment.

Khalid Gill, head of Lahore zone of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA) and chief organizer of the Christian Liberation Front of Punjab Province, said that police violated the trust of their office.

"Keeping alcohol and drinking is taboo in Islam," Gill said, "but Christians are issued permits to keep and drink alcohol. Now besides the discriminatory blasphemy laws of Sections 295-A, 295-B and 295-C of the penal code, fanatical Muslims and police have found this new way to harass and extort money from innocent, impoverished Christian families."

The Rt. Rev. Bishop Naeem Essa condemned the police action, concurring with the other Christian leaders that Muslim extremists and police accustomed to using Pakistan's blasphemy laws to unjustly jail Christians have found a new means of antagonism.

"Now they have grabbed a new weapon in Section 3/4 of the penal code to financially, socially and legally terrorize the weak Christians of Pakistan," Essa said.

Armed Attack on Chapel

In another Easter week incident, in Rawalpindi law enforcement agents secured the liberty of Christians held hostage by several armed Muslim militants, including at least five burqa-clad women, who attacked a church building after a Good Friday (April 2) service.

APMA's Gill said the assailants armed with automatic rifles and pistols desecrated Gordon College Chapel of Robinson Community Development Ministries (RCDM) Church and ripped apart books, including the Bible. The assailants also entered nearby residences and reprimanded adults and children for their faith in Christ, besides looting many of the homes, Gill said.

Eyewitnesses said that while two Christians, Shaban Gill and Imran Nazir, were scaling the wall of their property to enter their home, the Muslim militants opened fire on them. Gill managed to escape but Nazir was hit, and the militants held his wife and two daughters, one 4 years old and the other 18 months, at gunpoint.

A heavy contingent of police from City Police Station Raja Bazaar arrived at the scene, and with the help of local Christians broke down doors and gates to make their way into the property and its adjoining residential area. Police secured the liberty of all three Christian hostages and arrested at least 10 suspects.

Nine of the suspects have been identified as Mushtaq Ahmed, Amjad Zaman Cheema, Dildar Hussein, Muhammad Anwer and Saqib Ali, along with the burqa-clad Nusrat Bibi, Shahnaz Bibi, Irum Bibi and Fatima Bibi.

Police were initially reluctant to file charges against the arrested Muslims but eventually did so under the pressure from Christian rights activists Robinson Asghar, head of RCDM.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

A Hindu girl has been abducted by a landlord and forcibly converted to Islam

The authorities have refused to intervene

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) / HRWF (08.04.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - has received information about the abduction of a 15-year-old Hindu girl in October last year. Police and state officials refused to look into the case. After the victim was found in captivity with her parents' employer – a local landlord – they were told that she had married and converted to Islam, however they were not able to speak with her alone and she has since disappeared again without trace. There are extremely strong fears for her safety, and strong concerns that the Punjab authorities are indulging in extreme negligence of their duties to protect minors.

CASE DETAILS:

The following information was received from Hare Rama Foundation, an NGO working for the rights of religious minorities, and from the vice president of the National Peace Committee for Interfaith Harmony, an organization formed by the federal government.

On October 16, 2009 the parents of Miss Gomti, 15, went to the house of their landlord's house to ask about their daughter, who worked at the house as a domestic servant for a number of years. Her parents had not seen her since 12 October. They were told that she had left with the landlord two days earlier, but that he had not mentioned where he was taking her. Miss Gomti's parents are field workers in Ahmedpur Sharqiya, Bahawalpur, Punjab for the landlord, Mr. Asghar Ali.

Gomti's father Bheeka Ram and his wife took the case to the Shahi wala police chowki (a sub-station of the Head Rajkan police station), but were simply told that she would likely be returned soon.

The parents contacted Mr. Ramesh Jay Pal, the vice president of the National Peace Committee for Interfaith Harmony in Punjab, which is an organization formed by the federal government. On 18 October 2009 he arranged a Panchayat, a meeting of representatives from different Muslim groups which resolved to find Gomti and try to help her.

After about six weeks she was found with Asghar Ali at a village called Wali Ka Dera, in the Khanpur sub-district of Rahim Yar Khan, which is a remote place in the desert about 130km from the girl's home village. Ali told the Panchayat that Gomti had married one of his peasants, a Mr. Liaquat Ali, after converting to Islam however her alleged husband could not be produced. When Gomti was presented to the group by staff from the local seminary, her name had been changed to Sughra, a Muslim name. She appeared to not be aware of this change however.

Gomti's parents claim that they were only able to meet her in the presence of employees of Asghar Ali. She appeared to be under pressure, and reportedly asked her parents to convert to Islam. The parents were not able to take her home with them and we are told that she has been missing from the village since February. Her marriage certificate claims that she is 19.

According to the records of the Hare Rama Foundation, more than ten Hindu girls were abducted and forcibly converted in a similar style in 2009 and the issue is one that has been repeatedly highlighted by the National Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

Source: ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION – 18 April 2010

Punjab Muslim fundamentalists against the Ahmadis, three traders killed

Fareed Khan

AsiaNews (08.04.2010) / HRWF (08.04.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The persecution of the Ahmadi Muslims continues in Pakistan, considered heretical because they do not recognize Muhammad as the last prophet. On April last three traders were killed in Faisalabad - the third largest city of Punjab. The murder was reported by the leaders of the Ahmadiyya community, who speak of a "targeted execution" by an armed commando who immediately fled the scene.

Ashraf Pervez, 60, Masood Javed, 57, and Asif Masood, 24, were returning home after the closure of the shops. Suddenly, attackers riddled them with bullets. The three died on their way to hospital. Pervez and Javed were brothers, while Masood was the son of the latter. Two weeks before their death, reports the Pakistani newspaper Dawn, the victims had complained of threats to police. The officers had recommended them to "restrict their movement and recruit bodyguards" to protect their safety.

According to leaders of the Ahmadiyya community, most recently the men had been kidnapped and released after paying a high ransom. Criminals have reported that their faith was the cause of the abduction. "It is reasonable to assume that the criminals – reads a statement - or at least their accomplices are known to the authorities, because the groups against the Ahmadis do not bother to hide their hatred."

Faisalabad has long been the scene of targeted attacks against the Ahmadiyya community. In recent years, nine people were killed without the police or government authorities - who know the perpetrators - intervening. The group's leaders point the finger at the movement of Khatme Nabuwwat, Islamic followers according to whom the prophecy reaches its full completion with Mohammed, in charge of persecution against Muslims considered "heretics".

Punjab Law experts can foment violence against the Ahmadis with impunity, claiming that they "be killed" (Wajib ul Qatl). The leaders of the movement denounce the immobility of the authorities, in addition to not punishing the perpetrators of the killings, not even taking a stand against verbal violence.

Since the enactment of the Anti-Ahmadiyya Ordinance in 1984 which allows for persecution of the alleged "heretics" 108 people were killed because of their faith. In a few cases the killers were arrested and the few times have appeared before the judges, they were acquitted or freed after a short prison sentence. So far this year, five Ahmadis have been killed.

Pakistani Muslim prohibits burial in Christian graveyard

Land-grabber seizes cemetery, keeps mourners from burying body of young man

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct (01.04.2010) / HRWF (02.04.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Muslim land owner who effectively seized a Christian graveyard here refused to allow the burial of a young Christian at the site on Sunday (March 28).

Christians in Noshera Virkan, Gujranwala, have only one graveyard measuring little more than one acre. This longstanding disadvantage turned into a nightmare when Muhammad Boota, who owns much of the land in the area, prohibited Christians from burying the body of 25-year-old Riaz Masih there on Sunday (March 28).

Social worker Sajjad Masih told Compass that in the midst of the dispute, police from Saddar police station arrived and sided with Boota.

"You may burn your dead, but you cannot bury them in this graveyard," Assistant Sub-Inspector (ASI) Asif Cheema told mourners while beating them and pushing them out of the graveyard, according to Masih.

The Christian mourners dispersed, and then went to the Station House Officer of the Saddar police station with their complaint. He did not pay heed to them, Masih said.

The death of a youth is always seen as a great tragedy in Pakistani culture, he said, making Boota's denial especially callous. Masih said that when the Christian mourners saw no other option, he helped them organize a protest the next day; he and the crowd took the body to the office of the highest police officer in the city, the deputy inspector general (DIG) of Gujranwala. Mourners protested for two hours before the DIG on Monday (March 29), and police later accompanied them to the graveyard to allow the burial.

"We blocked a road and chanted slogans against the police and Muhammad Boota," Masih said, "and after a few hours the DIG called us to his office. After listening, the DIG assured his support and referred the case to the relevant superintendent of the police,

who told us that Boota would be arrested, and that he would also suspend ASI Asif Cheema.”

The SP said he would also order the arrest of anyone who kept Christians from burying their dead in the graveyard, Masih added.

None of the promises have been fulfilled. Khalid Gill, chief organizer in Punjab Province of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance, said Boota has not been arrested, nor has ASI Cheema been suspended, as the superintendent of police had only promised those actions to appease the Christian community.

“It is a very common practice of government officials to settle down tensions with false promises that they never fulfill,” Gill said.

Gill told Compass that Boota had stationed armed men two weeks prior to the attempted burial to stop Christians from entering the graveyard. The graveyard has a long history as a Christian burial site, Gill said, but in 1997 Boota obtained one-fourth of it and then immediately filed a court case for full possession, bringing an interim stay order until the case is decided.

Pakistan civil cases often go on for decades, Gill said, and the case is still pending. He said that Boota turned part of the graveyard land that he obtained into a bus stop and used another part for his residence.

A local area source told Compass on the condition of anonymity that Boota enjoyed the backing of Member of Provincial Assembly Chaudhry Khalid Parvaiz Virk. He said that Virk was part of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), which is in power in Punjab Province.

“He was supporting the land grabbers, and the provincial government has taken no notice of it,” the source said.

Blasphemy laws haunt majority community in Pakistan

Anita Joshua

The Hindu (25.03.2010) / HRWF (08.04.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The blasphemy laws have come to haunt the majority community in Pakistan with rival sects of Islam increasingly using Sections 295-B and C of the Pakistan Penal Code against each other.

While minority groups continue to face action under this legacy of the Zia-ul-Haq regime, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) in its report released on Monday cites numerous cases of Muslims being booked under the blasphemy laws.

In fact, a majority of the 41 complaints registered by the police in 2009 involved Muslims. According to HRCP secretary-general I. A. Rehman, the blasphemy laws had come full circle as rival sects have begun to use these provisions to settle scores with each other. While this has become an interesting statistic for civil rights groups to use in their ongoing fight for the repeal of the blasphemy laws, the HRCP report states that 2009 saw an increase in violent attacks on minorities as the government failed to take effective preventive measures. “As the Pakistan Army and para-military forces conducted military operations against the Taliban networks in Swat and other tribal areas including South Waziristan, the militants struck with vengeance in other parts of the country at non-Muslim minorities as well as the Muslim minority Shia sect.”

All minority groups faced ultimatums to convert to Islam with the Commission coming across instances of the Taliban threatening Hindus to either pay Jazia (a medieval period tax on minorities) or accept Islam to save themselves from abduction and murder. Referring to a specific incident in the Kohat district of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), Mr. Rehman said non-state actors became so powerful that they managed to collect Jazia and still some Hindu families had to flee the area.

Referring to another incident which took place in Battagram in the Hazara district of the NWFP, Mr. Rehman said the term Jazia was heard in these parts for the first time since the days of Mughal ruler Aurangzeb. Home to 15 Hindu families — living there for generations — the elder of the community was asked to cough up Rs. 6 million by militants and the Taliban.

And, the Commission fears that there could be more such cases which go unreported; particularly from the "no-go areas" in the tribal belt that is caught in the crossfire between extremist groups and security forces in a "xenophobic atmosphere created and promoted by conservative clerics and a section of the media".

Christian woman jailed under Pakistan's 'blasphemy' laws

Radical Muslim relative of accuser uses statute to exact revenge, Christian leader says

By Jawad Mazhar

Compass Direct (24.03.2010) / HRWF (25.03.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Police in Alipur have arrested a Christian woman on a baseless accusation of "blaspheming" the prophet of Islam and tried to keep rights groups from discovering the detention, a Christian leader said.

Alipur police in Punjab Province denied that they had detained Rubina Bibi when Khalid Gill, Lahore regional coordinator of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA) and organizer of the Christian Liberation Front, inquired about her detention after a Muslim woman accused her of blasphemy, Gill told Compass.

"The Muslim woman's name was kept secret by the police and Muslim people, and we were not allowed to see the Christian woman," Gill said. "The Alipur police said they had not arrested her yet, contrary to the fact that they had arrested and tortured her at Alipur police station."

A reliable police source told Compass on condition of anonymity that a First Information Report (No. 194/2010) dated March 20 identified Rubina Bibi of Alipur, wife of Amjad Masih, as accused of making a derogatory remark about the Islamic prophet Muhammad. The charge comes under Section 295-C of Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which have gained international notoriety for their misuse by Muslims to settle personal grudges.

The police source said Rubina Bibi had been transferred to Gujranwala Jail on judicial remand. Alipur is a town near Pakistan's industrial hub of Gujranwala.

Police told Compass that the FIR was now sealed and no further information would be released to any person or news outlet.

Alipur police told Compass that Rubina Bibi was incarcerated at Gujranwala Jail, and they denied further comment. Inspector Asif Nadeem, Station House Officer of Alipur police, declined to speak to Compass in spite of repeated efforts to contact him.

APMA's Gill said the case registered against Rubina Bibi was without basis, growing out of a quarrel with her Muslim accuser over a minor domestic dispute. Condemning the arrest, Gill said a radical Muslim relative of the accuser, Sabir Munir Qadri, had turned the quarrel into a religious issue in which the Christian could be sentenced to death or life imprisonment with a large fine.

"The Muslim woman's relative and plaintiff, Sabir Munir Qadri, filed a case against the hapless Christian woman under Section 295-C of the blasphemy laws of the Pakistan Penal Code, using it like a weapon against the Christian woman," Gill said.

He urged the Pakistani government to immediately rescind the blasphemy laws – 295-A for injuring religious feelings, 295-B for defiling the Quran and 295-C for blaspheming Muhammad – because they have so often been misused by fanatical Muslims against Christians "as a sword of death."

The case comes on the heels of the March 3 sentencing in Kasur of a Christian couple to 25 years in prison under Section 295-B for defiling the Quran. Ruqqiya Bibi and her husband Munir Masih had been arrested by Mustafabad police in December 2008 for touching Islam's sacred scripture without ritually washing.

Tahir Gul, a lawyer with the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement, told Compass that the matter arose out of a quarrel between Muslim and Christian children and turned into a clash of their parents.

In Karachi, a court on Feb. 25 sentenced another Christian, Qamar David, to 25 years in prison and a fine of 100,000 rupees (US\$1,170) after he was convicted without basis for sending blasphemous text messages in May 2006. David was convicted under Section 295-A of the blasphemy statutes for "injuring religious feelings of any community," and also under Section 295-C for derogatory remarks against Muhammad.

His lawyer, Pervaiz Aslam Chaudhry, told Compass that the conviction was without basis as all 16 witnesses at the trial said that not David but the owner of the cell phone through which they received the blasphemous messages was guilty.

Maximum punishment for violation of Section 295-A is life imprisonment, and for Section 295-C the maximum punishment is death, though life imprisonment is also possible. David received the sentence of life in prison, which is 25 years in Pakistan. He had not been granted bail since his arrest in 2006.

Muslims murder Pakistani Christian with axe blows

Rival merchants threatened to kill potato seller if refused to convert to Islam

By Jawad Mazhar

Compass Direct (22.03.2010) / HRWF (25.03.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Six Muslims in Khanewal district, southern Punjab Province, killed a Christian with multiple axe blows for refusing to convert to Islam this month, according to family and police sources.

The six men had threatened to kill 36-year-old Rasheed Masih unless he converted to Islam when they grew resentful of his potato business succeeding beyond their own, according to Masih's younger brother Munir Asi and a local clergyman. The rival merchants allegedly killed him after luring him to their farmhouse on March 9, leaving him on a roadside near Kothi Nand Singh village in the wee hours of the next day.

The Rev. Iqbal Masih of the Mian Channu Parish of the Church of Pakistan said Rasheed Masih was a devoted Christian, and that both he and his brother Asi had refused the Muslims' pressure to convert to Islam.

"As the Christian family strengthened in business and earned more, the Muslim men began to harbor business resentment, as Muslims are not used to seeing Christians more respected and richer than them," the pastor said. "That business rivalry gradually changed into a faith rivalry."

Mian Channu police have registered a case against the six men and an investigation is underway, but the suspects are still at large, police officers told Compass. Police said the suspects were Ghulam Rasool, Muhammad Asif, Muhammad Amjad, one identified only as Kashif and two other unidentified Muslims; they were charged with torture and murder.

Masih's family lives in Babo John Colony, Mian Channu of Khanewal district. Masih's brother Asi is a representative of the Council of Mian Channu.

"Our continuous denial to recant our faith and convert gradually turned into enmity," Asi told Compass. The FIR further states, "Both the Muslim men [Rasool and Asif] were not only inviting them to Islam but hurling threats of dire consequences and death on them for the last six months in case they refused to convert."

Police said Rasool – a radical Muslim who along with Asif had threatened to kill the brothers if they did not convert, according to Asi – called Rasheed Masih to his farmhouse ostensibly to purchase potatoes on March 9, and that Rasheed went to it by motorbike at about 5:30 p.m. Waiting for Masih there, police said, were Rasool and Asif with an axe, Amjad and Kashif with iron rods and the two unknown Muslims with clubs.

They began striking him as soon as he arrived, police said.

An autopsy under the supervision of Dr. Muhammad Khalid of Tehsil Headquarters Hospital Mian Channu revealed 24 wounds all over the body of Masih, according to a copy of the report obtained by Compass.

"In my opinion, cause of death in this case is due to the shock caused by all the above-mentioned injuries collectively and torture," Khalid states in the report. "All the injuries are ante-mortem and sufficient to cause death in an ordinary course of nature."

According to the FIR, when Asi and two Christian friends went to the farmhouse when Masih failed to return after a few hours, they were stunned to hear Masih shrieking as they witnessed him being beaten and struck with an axe.

"As Ghulam Rasool and his accomplices saw me at the farmhouse," Asi told police, according to the FIR, "the Muslim men put my fatally injured brother on a motorcycle and then threw him off the road near village Kothi Nand Singh."

Asi and his Christian friends found Masih by the roadside after he had succumbed to his injuries. The Muslims had absconded with Masih's motorcycle and 350,000 rupees (US\$4,088), as well as his cell phone, according to the FIR.

As Asi and his Christian friends were on their way to the hospital with the body of Masih, a city police station patrol met them and transferred the body to the Tehsil Headquarters Hospital Mian Channu.

At press time the Muslim suspects were at large even though police have filed a case strong enough to apprehend and prosecute them, Asi said. He appealed for assistance from Christian rights groups and politicians, as his family is still receiving death threats in a bid to intimidate them into withdrawing the case, he said, and they feel powerless in comparison with the influence and wealth of the Muslim suspects.

Kidnapping reflects fears of Pakistan minorities

By Zarar Khan

AP (22.03.2010) / HRWF (24.03.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Five Sikh men who fled their hometown on the Afghan border were making a quick trip back home when masked men blocked their way with a pickup on a mountain road not far from the Khyber Pass.

There were no houses, no buildings, no other cars in sight. The kidnappers covered their faces with black scarves and carried machine-guns.

Surjeet Singh had just wanted to check on the small grocery store he had left behind in Dabori, the Pakistani town he fled a year ago when it was overrun with Taliban fighters and the government launched a bombing campaign against them. In an area torn by Islamist violence, it had quickly become a dangerous place for a non-Muslim.

Singh and the four friends traveling with him that day all wore the carefully wrapped turbans that made their Sikh religion clear.

They were going back to pick up money they were owed, or to check on their businesses. They had called friends ahead of time to check on the situation. They thought a quick trip would be safe.

"We were born there. We grew up there," said Singh, who today is recovering from a bullet wound in a small apartment in a crowded maze-like neighborhood of Peshawar, the largest city in Pakistan's northwest. "Our forefathers had been there for hundreds of years. We have houses, shops, land."

In today's Pakistan, though, that is not enough.

In a country beset by a powerful Islamist insurgency, where suicide bombings are commonplace and government offensives widely dismissed as ineffective, anyone can become a victim. But for the nation's minorities - its small communities of Hindus, Christians and Sikhs - life is particularly precarious. Thousands have fled their villages, crowding into urban slums. Thousands more have fled the country.

"With the rise in militancy in our society in general, and in the northwest in particular, minorities are feeling more threatened," said I.A. Rehman, a senior official with Pakistan's Human Rights Commission. He noted that many Sikhs have been driven from their homes, and those that remain are now often forced to pay the militants a "jizya" - a traditional tax for non-Muslim.

Singh's journey, which began on a cold morning in January and ended 42 days later with a March 1 bloody gunbattle, underscores the threats to those minorities, as well as the lawlessness of Pakistan's frontier regions.

Two months later, it's still not clear exactly why the Sikhs were targeted: Were the bandits waiting for them? Would they have kidnapped anyone who came by? Certainly their religion made them easier targets, since it is more difficult for them to make use of the region's informal power networks, the tribal and religious leaders who can protect people in the semiautonomous areas.

On that day, though, as armed men swarmed toward their car, shouting for the five Sikh men to move quickly, all Singh and his friends were thinking about was survival.

Two of them managed to slip away amid the chaos, but three - all sharing the same common Sikh surname, Singh - were quickly captured.

"They held us at gunpoint, immediately dragged us out of our car," said Surjeet Singh, a quiet composed man. He and his friends were blindfolded and driven for about an hour. Then they began walking.

They could see nothing through their blindfolds. They could only feel cold pressing in as they climbed higher into the Hindu Kush mountains.

After hours of walking, they were brought to a set of rooms carved into the mountainside. It would be their home for the next 42 days. There they would be kept chained and often blindfolded. Occasionally, they were beaten. The prisoners never saw their captors' faces - which were always covered with scarves - and even now they do not know who they were.

They clearly were militant Muslims, forcibly cutting their prisoners hair. Keeping hair uncut is a deeply important religious precept for Sikh men.

But the real reason for the kidnapping was quickly clear: money.

Surjeet Singh did not want to talk about ransom demands but the other survivor, 18-year-old Gurvinder Singh, told the Times of India newspaper that their captors brought them mobile phones on their first morning in the cave. They were ordered to call their families and say their freedom would cost 50 million rupees, or about \$600,000. When it was clear that money could not be raised, the number dropped to 20 million rupees, or \$240,000.

After that: nothing. The men made no further phone calls, their captors barely spoke to them. Their days passed in silence.

"Every day was like a month, and a month was like a year," Singh said.

After a few weeks, Jaspal Singh was suddenly taken away.

The other Sikhs were told he'd been freed. "You will also be released if you give us money," their captors taunted them.

In the end, though, their captors got nothing.

Twelve days after Jaspal disappeared, the thunder of helicopters filled the air as teams of Pakistani commandos swarmed the camp.

The government has declined all comment on the raid, which was apparently among a series of attacks on insurgent camps. The Pakistani soldiers were surprised to find the kidnapped men who - with their hair now shorn - had a difficult time convincing their rescuers that they were Sikhs and not militants.

Amid the gunfire during the raid, Surjeet had been shot twice in the abdomen but is recovering well. Gurvinder, barely an adult, has moved in with family living in the far off city of Lahore. Both say that some day they hope to return home.

But the story doesn't end well.

When they arrived in Peshawar, the two friends discovered that Jaspal - 29 years old with a wife and four young children - was dead. He had been killed by the militants to pressure their families to pay a ransom.

He had been decapitated.

Pakistani Christian couple refuses to convert: husband is burnt alive, wife raped by police

By Fareed Khan

AsiaNews (22.03.2010) / HRWF (24.03.2010) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Arshed Masih, 38, is still fighting for his life in Holy Family Hospital in Rawalpindi, a city not far from Pakistan's capital. With the help of police, Muslim extremists last Friday set him on fire for refusing to convert to Islam and raped his wife, local sources told AsiaNews. The incident occurred in front of a local police station.

In 2005, Masih and his wife began working for a wealthy Muslim businessman, he as driver and she as his wife's maid. Recently, the two fell out of favour with their employer and his family because they insisted on remaining Christian.

During the incident, Masih's wife, Martha, "was raped by police agents," local sources said. The couple's three children, ranging in age from 7 and 12, were forced to watch their parents being brutalised.

"Masih and his wife are currently being treated in hospital," Holy Family Hospital officials said. "He was listed in serious condition with about 80 per cent of his body burned," the BosNewsLife agency reported. With that kind of burns, hospital officials said the 38-year-old victim (pictured) is not likely to survive.

On Sunday, the Government of Punjab government announced an investigation into what happened. "The matter will be investigated and the culprits will be arrested," Punjab's Minister of Law Rana Sanaullah said.

The Christian couple lived with their children in the servant quarters of Sheikh Mohammad Sultan's estate in Rawalpindi. In January, religious leaders and Sultan reportedly told Arshed to convert to Islam with his whole family. After he refused, they threatened him with "dire consequences".

Arshed offered to quit his job, but the businessman allegedly said he would "kill" him if he were to leave.

Last week, tensions rose after Sultan reported the theft of 500,000 Pakistani rupees (almost US\$ 6,000), and an official complaint (First Information Report) was filed with police.

Although the Christian couple was not named as suspect, the businessman offered them to drop the case if they converted to Islam or "else that both would not see their children again."

The rest is known. Arshed Masih chose to remain loyal to his Christian faith, and last Friday he was set on fire and his wife raped by police.

Federal Minority Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, a Catholic, has so far refused to make any comment because he was "busy". He did say however, that he would issue a statement in the next few days.

Christian organisations in Rawalpindi and Lahore planned protests for today.

11 Ahmadis killed during 2009: report

Daily Times (12.03.2010) / HRWF (13.03.2010) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - During the year 2009, eleven Ahmadis were killed while numerous others became victims of attempted killings, a recently published report titled 'Persecution of Ahmadis in Pakistan during the year 2009'.

Since the promulgation of an anti-Ahmadi law in 1984, not a year has passed when there have been less than ten Ahmadi casualties due to religious bias. The report, which was released by Nazarat Umooor-e-Aama Sadr Anjuman Ahmadiya Pakistan (Rabwa), claimed that the actions of "Ahmadi opponents" had been encouraged largely by the prejudiced attitude of the authorities.

It alleged that the federal government had been in denial of the human rights and religious freedom of the Ahmadis, especially the governments of Punjab and Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

Apart from the killings, dozens of Ahmadis, including women and children, were booked for blasphemy. The report vehemently condemned the behaviour of the authorities and the "brutalities of religious fanatics" against the Ahmadi sect, while urging the federal as well as the provincial governments to take concrete steps to prevent gross abuse of human rights.

Christians refuse to allow officials to close Church in Indonesia

Compass Direct News (11.03.2010) / HRWF (12.03.2010) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Efforts by local officials in this city in West Java to close a church met with stiff resistance this month, as a defiant lawyer and weeping women refused to allow it.

Women of the Huria Christian Protestant Batak Church (HKBP) cried in protest as officials from the Bekasi Building Department on March 1 placed a brown signboard of closure on the church building in Pondok Timur, Bekasi, 12 miles (19 kilometers) from Jakarta.

The seal stayed in place for about two minutes before some of the shrieking women tore it down. The sign was trampled as furious church members stampeded over it, shouting and screaming. Bekasi city officials turned and ran as the congregation fanned out.

The defiance followed a heated debate within the same church building minutes before, as the Christians had invited the Bekasi officials inside to discuss the matter when they arrived to seal the building. The discussion soon became heated as a city official asserted that the church did not have a building permit.

The church had applied for a worship building permit in 2006, but local officials had yet to act on it, according to the church's pastor, the Rev. Luspida Simanjuntak.

At the meeting inside the church building, attorney Refer Harianya said that the sealing process was illegal, as it requires that public notice be given.

"HKBP has never seen nor received the formal order and has not acknowledged such an order by signing a receipt," Harianya said. "In addition, public notice must be given in the form of formal reading of the order."

Harianya added that the legal basis for sealing the church was weak. The Joint Ministerial Decree revised in 2006 clearly states in Paragraph 21 that when there is a problem with the building of a house of worship, it must be solved through formal consultation with local residents, he said.

"At this stage, resolution has not taken place," he said.

Harianya said that in case such a consultation failed to resolve conflicts, then the mayor may consult with the Department of Religion – "in a just and non-prejudicial manner" – taking into account suggestions from the Interfaith Harmony Forum.

"On this point, up to March 1, the church has never been invited to talk with the mayor," he said.

The Joint Ministerial Decree had not been correctly applied in the sealing of the church, Harianya concluded, adding that contested cases could always be taken to court.

"We still have some legal avenues open," he said. "This is not the time for a surprise sealing."

Harianya also cited Mayor Decree No. 16 (2006) regarding the construction of a house of worship in Bekasi City, where Article 11 states that before a building is sealed there must be three written notices given. This process also had not been carried out, he said.

"Because you have not followed the procedures which I have outlined, we will act as if the sealing never took place," Harianya told city officials as members of the congregation cheered.

The sealing of the church would thus be illegal, so the government had broken the law, he said. Harianya said that HKBP members would not hinder officials from carrying out their duties, but that they would be named in a lawsuit.

One of the officials, identified only as Pemana, responded, "Go ahead and sue."

"If the seal is in place," Harianya said, "We can break it because the act of sealing is illegal. Agreed?"

"Agreed," answered the 75 parishioners present.

With the meeting ending in a deadlock, city officials prepared to place the signboard to seal the church, with the ensuing tumult.

Mayor fails to show

Prior to the showdown, at 10 a.m. Pastor Simanjuntak, the Rev. Pieteron Purba and Harianya had a scheduled a meeting with Bekasi Mayor Mochtar Mohamad – promised by an official named H. Junaedi during a demonstration on Feb. 28 – only to discover that the visit had not been placed on the mayor’s schedule.

As they waited, Pastor Simanjuntak received a mobile phone call saying that city building officials were at the church site and had been there since 9 a.m.

The following day, March 2, the HKBP leaders and leaders from three other churches were able to meet the mayor, who promised to help them find new places of worship. While they waited for the new sites, the mayor suggested, the HKBP church could use a multipurpose room belonging to the Social Department starting March 7.

Subsequently, Pastor Simanjuntak and members of the congregation rejected the proposal, reasoning that moving somewhere else was equivalent to being ejected from their building.

Worship resumed as usual at 7 a.m. on Sunday, March 7, under the strict watch of police and soldiers who had stood guard all night. The service finished two hours later without incident.

“Because this was a congregational decision, from next Sunday onwards we will be holding services in the house of worship here at No. 14 Puyuh Raya Street,” said Pastor Simanjuntak.

Pakistan’s ‘blasphemy’ laws claim three more Christians

Cafeteria worker, couple convicted without basis under widely condemned statutes

By Brian Sharma

Compass Direct News (10.03.2010) / HRWF (12.03.2010) - Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Christian couple was sentenced to 25 years in prison for violating Pakistan’s widely condemned “blasphemy” laws last week, and another Christian convicted without basis under the same statutes the previous week received the same sentence.

In Kasur, Ruqqiya Bibi and her husband Munir Masih were sentenced on March 3 to 25 years of prison under Section 295-B of the Pakistan Penal Code for defiling the Quran. They had been arrested by Mustafabad police in December 2008 for touching Islam’s sacred scripture without ritually washing.

Punishment for defiling the Quran is “life imprisonment,” which means 25 years in Pakistan.

Prosecution witnesses accused Ruqqiya and her husband of using the Quran as part of black magic, and that in the process Ruqqiya had touched it without it without ritual

cleansing. They also claimed that the couple had written the creed of Islam, or Kalima-e-Tayyaba, on the walls of their house.

Tahir Gul, a lawyer of the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS), told Compass that the Christian couple had not used the Quran for black magic. He said the matter arose out of a quarrel between Muslim and Christian children and turned into a clash of their parents. Because Pakistan's blasphemy statutes are so commonly used to settle such personal scores, they are widely condemned by human rights advocates and legislators around the world.

After police investigation, the couple was further charged under Section 295-C of the blasphemy laws, which criminalizes any derogatory remark – spoken, written or by visible representation – against Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. The minimum punishment for such remarks is also "life imprisonment" of 25 years, but the law also allows for the death penalty.

Gul said the court had absolved the couple of charges under Section 295-C, as no evidence was found of them blaspheming Muhammad. He said that when the crime report was initially filed, the couple was accused only of defiling the Quran and not of blaspheming Muhammad.

The attorney said the case would be appealed in the Lahore High Court.

In Karachi, the Additional District and Sessions Court on Feb. 25 sentenced another Christian, Qamar David, to 25 years in prison and a fine of 100,000 rupees (US\$1,170) after he was convicted without basis of sending blasphemous text messages in May 2006.

David was convicted under Section 295-A of the blasphemy statutes for "injuring religious feelings of any community," and also under Section 295-C for derogatory remarks against Muhammad. Maximum punishment for violation of Section 295-A is life imprisonment, and for Section 295-C the maximum punishment is death, though life imprisonment is also possible.

David received the sentence of life in prison.

His lawyer, Pervaiz Aslam Chaudhry, told Compass that the conviction was without basis as all 16 witnesses at the trial said that not David but the owner of the cell phone, who is also the subscriber to the SIM card through which they received the blasphemous messages, was guilty. The SIM card and the cell phone are owned by a Muslim, Munawar Ahmad, who was named with David, he said.

"In spite of these facts, the court has absolved him [Ahmad] of all charges," Chaudhry said.

In May 2006, two First Information Reports (FIR) were filed against David in Karachi under sections 295-A and 295-C. The first was filed under both sections by Khursheed Ahmed Khan, a travel agent, at the Sadar Police Station in Clifton. David still awaits trial on the second FIR, also under sections 295-A and 295-C, filed by Hafiz Muhammad Hamid at the Azizabad police station in Gulberg Town.

David has never been granted bail since his arrest in 2006, and he is in Central Jail in Landhi. Chaudhry said that he would file an application in the Sindh High Court for a hearing on the second case, because no trial date has been given despite the lapse of three and a half years.

"I feel that Qamar will also be convicted in the lower court again, because we see no signs of impartiality," he added.

David's family members criticized the blasphemy laws and his conviction, holding a protest on Feb. 28 with the help of Save the Churches' Property Welfare Association and the United Church of Christ. They said that David was innocent and that the court was biased.

Chaudhry said that David lived a harsh life in the jail, where he was often threatened and once attacked by fellow inmates. The attorney said his client has faced obstacles in pursuing his case, and that extremists accused him of being a supporter of "blasphemers" because he was a Christian.

"Muslims raised slogans of triumph of Islam outside the court premises on the day David was convicted," Chaudhry said. "The judgment was expected against David due to pressure on the judge, Jangu Khan."

David had worked in the cafeteria of a hospital in Karachi, where he served drinks and food to customers, before he was accused in May 2006 of sending blasphemous messages.

Pakistani Christian sentenced to life under spurious blasphemy charges

CSW (26.02.2010) / HRWF (27.02.2010) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is deeply concerned over news that a Pakistani Christian from Lahore was sentenced to life imprisonment for blasphemy against the Prophet Mohammed yesterday.

Qamar David has been in prison awaiting a verdict since 2006, after being refused bail. During that time both Mr David and his lawyer, Mr Parvez Choudhry, were regularly subjected to assassination attempts and threats of violence from abusive mobs.

A contact close to Mr David is of the opinion that the facts, evidence and law have been in his favour. The evidence against him is said to be based on hearsay, and an accused Muslim in a parallel case was fully acquitted on the same facts. Speaking on condition of anonymity, the source described the final judgement as "biased and prejudiced," and believes that external pressure on the court may have played a part in distorting the outcome.

CSW's National Director Stuart Windsor said: "This alarming verdict is yet further illustration of the urgent need for the government of Pakistan to repeal its blasphemy laws. The legislation continues to be abused for the satisfaction of personal vendettas against Pakistanis of all faiths. It is a dangerous tool in the hands of those seeking to persecute or discriminate against religious minorities."

Pakistani Christian beaten for refusing to convert to Islam

Brothers converted by Muslim cleric who raised them leave him for dead

By Jawad Mazhar

Compass Direct (22.02.2010) / HRWF (23.02.2010) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The four older Muslim brothers of a 26-year-old Christian beat him unconscious here earlier this month because he refused their enticements to convert to Islam, the victim told Compass.

Riaz Masih, whose Christian parents died when he was a boy, said his continual refusal to convert infuriated his siblings and the Muslim cleric who raised them, Moulvi Peer Akram-Ullah. On Feb. 8, he said, his brothers ransacked his house in this Punjab Province town 233 kilometers (145 miles) southwest of Islamabad.

"They threatened that it was the breaking point now, and that I must convert right now or face death," Masih said. "They said killing an infidel is not a sin, instead it's righteousness in the sight of Allah almighty."

Masih begged them to give him a few minutes to consider converting and then tried to escape, but they grabbed him and beat him with bamboo clubs, leaving him for dead, he said.

"They vented their fury and left me, thinking that I was dead, but God Almighty resuscitated me to impart His good news of life," he said.

Masih told Compass that his brothers and Akram-Ullah have been trying to coerce him to convert to Islam since his brothers converted.

"They had been coercing me to embrace Islam since the time of their recantation of Christianity," Masih said, "but for the last one month they began to escalate immense pressure on me to convert."

He grew up with no chance to attend church services because of his siblings' conversion to Islam, he said, adding that in any event there was no church where he grew up. He knew two Christian families, however, and he said his love for the Christian faith in which he was originally raised grew as he persistently refused to convert to Islam.

He said Akram-Ullah and his brothers offered him 1 million rupees (US\$11,790), a spacious residence and a woman of his choice to marry in order to lure him to Islam, but he declined.

The Muslim cleric had converted Masih's brothers and sisters in like manner, according to human rights organization Rays of Development (ROD), which has provided financial, medical and moral support to Masih. ROD began assisting Masih after a chapter of the Christian Welfare Organization (CWO) brought the injured Christian to ROD.

A spokesman for CWO who requested anonymity told Compass that Akram-Ullah had offered Masih's brothers and sister a large plot of residential land, as well as 500,000 rupees (US\$5,895) each, if they would recite the kalimah, the profession of faith for converting to Islam.

"He never accepted the Islamic cleric's invitation to Islam, although his newly converted Muslim sister and four elder brothers escalated pressure on him to convert, as well, and live with them as a joint family," the CWO spokesman said.

Adnan Saeed, an executive member of ROD, told Compass that when Masih's parents, carpenter George Albert and his wife Stella Albert, passed away, Masih and his siblings were tenants of Akram-Ullah, who cared for them and inculcated them with Islamic ideology.

Saeed said that when they converted, Masih's now 37-year-old sister, Kathryn Albert, adopted the Islamic name of Aysha Bibi; Masih's brothers – Alliyas Masih, 35, Yaqoub Masih, 33, Nasir Masih, 31, and Gullfam Masih, 28 – adopted their new Islamic names of Muhammad Alliyas, Abdullah, Nasir Saeed and Gullfam Hassan respectively.

Masih's family attempted to kill him, Saeed said. A ROD team visited Masih at an undisclosed location and, besides the support they have given him, they are searching for a way to provide him legal assistance as well, Saeed said.

Masih said that because of Islamist hostilities, it would be unsafe for him to go to a police station or even a hospital for treatment. A well-to-do Christian has given shelter to him at an undisclosed location.

In hiding, Masih said that his brothers and Akram-Ullah are still hunting for him.

"Since they have discovered that I was alive and hiding somewhere, they are on the hunt for me," he said. "And if they found me, they would surely kill me."

Muslims murder Ahmadi sectarian leader

Spero News (07.02.2010) / HRWF (09.02.2010) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - An Ahmadi Muslim leader was gunned down allegedly for seeking police protection against Muslim sectarian zealots in Ferozewala police precincts on January 5, as reported by Pakistan's Daily Times.

The family of Muhammad Yousaf, 70, – leader of the Ahmadi community in Rachna Town, Ferozwala, Lahore – alleged that extremists killed their patriarch. In the police report, Yousaf's family alleged the local leadership of the Tehreek-e-Tahafuz-e-Khatm-e-Nabuwat (TTKN) assisted the killers. Earlier, extremists had gathered together, carrying placards and signboards bearing slogans condemning the Ahmadis.

After eight days, the men visited the police station with PML-N MPA Pir Ashraf Rasool to prove their innocence. The local court has not demanded bail for the alleged perpetrators.

Rachna Town is much like any other typical Pakistani lower-middle class locality. What differentiates Rachna Town from other localities, however, is the overwhelming presence of anti-Ahmadi banners, posters, signboards and graffiti on the streets and roads denouncing them as murdood (apostate), and thus enemies of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, who are Wajabul Qatal (ought to be killed).

Almost 150 Ahmadi families live in the area. The Ahmadis are adherents of a sect of Islam called Ahmadiyya, which considers itself to be Islam in its pristine form and its successor.

Pakistani Christian sentenced to life under 'blasphemy' law

Young man convicted of 'desecrating Quran' by accusation of rival shopkeeper

By Jawad Mazhar

Compass Direct (22.01.2010) / HRWF (25.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A young Christian shopkeeper was sentenced to a life term in prison and fined more than \$1,000 last week following a dubious conviction of desecrating the Quran, according to Pakistan's National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP).

Peter Jacob, general secretary of the NCJP, said 22-year-old Imran Masih of the Faisalabad suburb of Hajvairy was convicted of desecrating the Quran (Section 295-B of Pakistan's legal code) and thereby outraging religious feelings (Section 295-A) by Additional District & Sessions Judge Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan on Jan. 11. The conviction was based on the accusation of a rival shopkeeper who, as part of an Islamic extremist proselytizing group, allegedly used a mosque loudspeaker system to incite a mob that beat Masih and ransacked his shop.

Neighboring shopkeeper Hajji Liaquat Abdul Ghafoor accused Masih of tearing out pages of the Quran and burning them on July 1, 2009. Denying that he burned any pages of the Quran, Masih told investigators that the papers he burned were a heap of old merchandise records he had gathered while cleaning his store.

Masih's family members said Ghafoor fabricated the blasphemy case against him because of a business dispute. Nearby shopkeepers, initially reluctant to talk out of fear of reprisals but eventually speaking on condition of anonymity, told Compass that they had seen the two men arguing over business a few days before the incident occurred.

The shopkeepers said that when Masih burned the papers, Ghafoor started shouting that he had desecrated the Quran and blasphemed Islam and its prophet, Muhammad. In the case against Masih, police later accused Ghafoor of misusing the loudspeaker system of a mosque to stir up the mob.

"Ghafoor started shouting that Masih had desecrated the Quran and made blasphemous remarks about Islam and prophet Muhammad," said one of the shopkeepers. "Ghafoor spread misconceptions about Imran Masih, and a mob of angry Muslim men unaware of the facts attacked Masih and viciously beat him, looted his shop and later handed him over to police."

The shopkeepers added that Ghafoor was a hard-line Muslim and part of an Islamic proselytizing group.

Section 295-B of Pakistan's legal code, desecrating the Quran, is punishable by imprisonment for life. In accordance with Section 295-A (instigating religious hatred and outraging religious feelings), Masih was also sentenced to 10 years in prison and a fine of 100,000 rupees (US\$1,170); if he is unable to pay the fine, he will be assessed an additional six months in jail.

A conviction for blaspheming Muhammad (Section 295-C) is punishable by death under Pakistani's notorious blasphemy laws. Widely condemned by the international community as easily invoked to settle personal enmities, Pakistan's blasphemy laws have come under review in recent months, but to no avail.

The laws are routinely invoked to harass members of minority communities. Additionally, while police cannot make arrests without a court-issued warrant for Section 295-A, they can arrest suspected blasphemers under sections 295-B and 295-C on the complaint of a single individual.

Masih is incarcerated at District Jail Faisalabad. Sources said he plans to appeal his sentence to the Lahore High Court.

"No pages of the Quran were burned or desecrated," said one member of Masih's family, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "It was just a lame excuse to implicate him in a fabricated case of blasphemy."

Tahir Naveed Chaudhary, a Christian member of Punjab's legislative assembly and Sargodha zone head of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA), said Masih's case was just one in a long list of incidents in which blasphemy laws have been used to settle personal grudges. He said that APMA would provide legal assistance to Masih.

Five Pakistani Muslim men abduct a Christian woman

ICC (20.01.2010) / HRWF (21.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - International Christian Concern (ICC) learned that five Muslim men abducted a 21-year-old Christian girl in Sargodha, Pakistan.

It was reported to ICC that Muhammad Afzal, Maqsood Ahmed, Muhammad Ashraf and two other unidentified Muslim men abducted Asifa Bibi from her home at gunpoint. The Muslim men then dragged her into an unregistered black car and drove to an undisclosed location.

Asifa's father, Nasir Masih, told ICC that Muhammad Ashraf, one of the suspects, had previously asked Asifa to convert to Islam and marry him. In Pakistan, it is common for Muslim men to approach Christian girls and ask them to convert to Islam and marry them. If the girls refuse such advances, the men abduct, rape and forcefully convert them to Islam.

Asifa's family has reported the abduction to the police at Saddr police station. The police chief at the station told ICC that his office is investigating the case and hopes to arrest the suspects and secure the young woman's release as soon as possible.

ICC's Regional Manager for Africa and South Asia, Jonathan Racho, said, "We deplore the abduction of Asifa by the five Muslim men. We commend Pakistani police for promising to secure the release of Asifa and bring her abductors to justice."

Two Christians critically wounded at wedding in Pakistan

Still in intensive care, they were shot for refusing order to convert to Islam

By Jawad Mazhar

Compass Direct (14.01.2010) / HRWF (14.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Two Pakistani Christians who were shot at a wedding on Dec. 26 for refusing to convert to Islam are still receiving treatment at a hospital intensive care unit, but doctors are hopeful that they will recover.

In low, barely audible voices, Imran Masih, 21, and Khushi Masih, 24, told Compass that two Muslims armed with AK-47s in Punjab Province's Chak (village) 297-JB, in Toba Tek Singh district, shot them in their chests after they refused orders to recite the Islamic creed signifying conversion.

Soon after they arrived at the wedding, a group of Muslim youths armed with AK-47 assault rifles surrounded them and began shooting into the air, as is customary at village

weddings. They were not alarmed, they said, assuming the young Muslim men were simply celebrating joyfully.

“One of the green-turban-wearing Muslims peremptorily told us to recite the Islamic holy Kalima [profession of faith] or face direct bullets and the lethal consequences,” said Khushi Masih.

Both Christians said that they joyfully refused, and instead they began reciting Psalm 91. “Our decision infuriated them,” Imran Masih said, “and instead of shooting into the air, they shot us, leaving us only after being convinced that we were dead. Praise the name of Lord Jesus Christ, who raised us from the dead!”

The fathers of the two Christians found their sons collapsed in a puddle of blood and rushed them to Tehsil Headquarters Hospital. Imran Masih sustained two broken ribs from the shots, with one bullet passing two millimeters from his heart. Khushi Masih was wounded in the chest and right leg. Bullets from an AK-47 do less harm if they pass through the body than if they become lodged in the flesh and begin to fragment.

“They are recovering fast and their wounds are healing, but they were still under strict observation in the intensive care unit,” said the father of Imran Masih. He added that doctors are concerned for their lives but believe they will recover.

Police have registered a case against the suspects, whose names were not released, but have yet to arrest them, the station house officer of Saddr police station told Compass.

“Very soon we will arrest them to prosecute and put them behind the bars,” he said. The investigation is continuing, he added.

The suspects are basing their defense on the assertion that they shot the Christians by accident, said family members of the wounded Christians, strongly denying the claim.

The fathers of the two Christians said Islamic extremist Hafiz Aziz Gujjar, a member of a local hard-line proselytizing group, has long pressured the two victims to convert to Islam. They said Gujjar has enticed or pressured other Christians and followers of other faiths to recant their beliefs.

With a mixture of sorrow and pride, the fathers said that their sons remained firm in Christ, shedding blood but refusing to surrender their Christian vows.
