

Minorities and women continue to suffer in Pakistan: AI

Thursday 25 May 2006, by [Daily Times \(Pakistan\)](#) (Date first published: 24 May 2006).

Amnesty International's annual report says 72 charged under blasphemy laws, many 'disappear' on suspicion of being terrorists.

Staff Report

LAHORE: The government of Pakistan has failed to protect religious minorities and women, according to the Amnesty International's annual report for 2005.

Honour killing and mutilation of girls and women, and to a lesser extent of boys and men, continued according to the report, after legal changes in late 2004 failed to curb the authority of the victim's heirs to forgive perpetrators, allowing them to escape conviction.

The report says that successful persecution for honour killing was rare and at least 72 people were charged and arrested under blasphemy laws, including laws that make it a criminal offence for members of the Ahmadiyya Community to practice their faith. Among the accused were 39 Muslims, 26 Ahmadis, four Hindus and three Christians.

In October, eight Ahmadis were shot dead and 22 were injured during worship, by men shooting from a passing motorbike. Eighteen men arrested shortly afterwards were released without charge.

Mohammad Younus Sheikh was sentenced to life imprisonment in August on blasphemy charges, for writing a book. He was held in solitary confinement in Karachi Central Prison after fellow prisoners threatened him. No action was taken against those threatening violence.

Violence against women: In September, Amna Abbas' nose and lips were cut off by her brother-in-law near Dera Ghazi Khan after she filed for divorce.

Mukhtaran Mai's attempt to secure justice after being gang-raped on the orders of a council of elders in Meerwali led to her suffering further threats. In March the Lahore High Court reversed the August 2002 trial court's decision to sentence six men to death. It commuted the death sentence imposed on one to life imprisonment and acquitted and released five. On a request by Mukhtaran Mai, who feared for her life, the Punjab government held the five for three months in preventive detention. In June, a review board ordered their release.

The Supreme Court took up appeal against the acquittals and ordered all the original accused to be held in judicial custody. Mukhtaran Mai who had been invited to the USA to speak on women's rights, was prevented in June from leaving the country and placed under virtual house arrest. Women's rights activists were under increased threat, the report said. Police tore the clothes and dragged by the hair, women activists participating in a mixed gender marathon in Lahore in May last year. About 40 women were detained until evening.

Children's Rights: In February, the Supreme Court suspended the Lahore High Court judgment of December 2004 which had revoked the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance, 2000 (JJSO), as unconstitutional. The JJSO provides protection for children in the criminal justice system while the latest decision meant that the JJSO was reinstated, but only temporarily, pending a still awaited decision on the constitutionality of the law, by the Supreme Court. In several cases courts rejected applications for cases to be retried in Juvenile courts.

Religious laws: The government vacillated between seeking to control and appeasing religious groups and parties, the report says.

In March, it reintroduced a "religious column" in national passports in breach of earlier promises to minority groups. In July, following bomb attacks in the UK by men of Pakistani origin, at least 900 members of religious groups and religious school students were arrested. Most were released within weeks but some continued to be held under preventive legislation.

The government announced that all foreign students of religious schools would be expelled and that such schools needed to register. However, after protests by religious groups, these directions were not fully implemented. In July, the Hasba (accountability) Bill was passed in the North Western Frontier Province. It provided for an ombudsman empowered to "reform society in accordance with Islam".

The Supreme Court, in August, declared sections of the bill unconstitutional. In the tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan, civilians suffered during an ongoing security operation. The draft of a bill to establish a national human rights commission was presented in May but was not passed by the end of 2005.

Arbitrary arrests and 'disappearances': The reports says dozens of people were arbitrarily arrested and detained in the context of the "War on Terror". Several of them 'disappeared' and some were given into US custody.

Dozens of suspects, Pakistani as well as foreign men, women and children, were arbitrarily arrested on suspicion of terrorism and of contact with Al Qaeda. Several 'disappeared' in custody and some were handed over to the US, apparently without legal process.

Abu Faraj Al Libbi, a Libyan national alleged to be the operational commander of Al Qaeda, was arrested on May 2, 2005 in Mardan, near the border with Afghanistan. The Interior minister stated that he would be tried in an anti-terrorism court for attempting to assassinate the president. He was held incommunicado at an undisclosed location. At the end of May, Libbi was given in US custody, apparently without legal process. By the end of the year, nothing was known about his whereabouts or the whereabouts of the 12 other suspects arrested in connection with him.

The Human Rights persons investigating the situation in Balochistan found evidence of arbitrary arrests and detention, extrajudicial executions, torture and 'disappearances' committed by security and intelligence agencies. On December 9, 18 labour union leaders from Balochistan 'disappeared' in Karachi where they had gone to negotiate with the management of their company. Their whereabouts remain unknown.

Several members of Balochistan Student Organization (BSO) disappeared during 2005. BSO chairman Dr Imdad Baloch was arrested on March 25 along with 5 others in Karachi. He and three others were released on bail two months later facing politically motivated criminal charges. He reported that they had been tortured and held blindfolded, in iron shackles and threatened with death if they did not give up politics. The other two remained in custody.

Amnesty International Lahore has urged the government to take notice of human rights violation in Pakistan, ensure effective legislation for protection of rights and ensure appropriate implementation of the existing laws.

P.S.

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