

Threats of blasphemy charges to the Pakistani religious minorities

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During the last few weeks, three more Christians and a Shia religious leader in Pakistan have been facing blasphemy charges under Pakistan's discriminatory blasphemy laws, 295 B & C of Pakistan Penal Code for desecrating the Quran and Prophet Muhammad.

On May 28, a judge directed Peer Ilahi Bakhsh police in Karachi, Pakistan's major city, to file charges, under Section 295-B of Pakistan penal Code, of desecrating the Quran against two Christians, Atiq Joseph and Qaiser William, after a mob of armed Islamists went through their home's garbage looking for pages of the Islamic scripture among clean-up debris.

In another case a Pakistani Christian man Rehmat Masih, 73, was charged under blasphemy law, section 295-C, Pakistan Penal Code for "for making derogatory remarks about Prophet Muhammad and his wife Hazrat Khadija." On June 19, 2010, an FIR (First Information Report) number 321 was registered by Jhumra police station on a complaint of a Muslim man Sajid Hameed. Masih is a resident of village Jandwali Chak No.165/RB, Teshil Jhumra, District Faisalabad in Punjab province. With the passage of the Criminal Law Act of 1986, parliament added section 295-C to the Pakistan Penal Code blaspheming Prophet Muhammad is punishable by death.

He was arrested from his residence on the same day and sent to District Jail Faisalabad. He will be reappeared before Magistrate Muhammad Sajawal on July 4, 2010 for complete challan.

According to Shahid Anwar, Coordinator, National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP) Faisalabad, on June 10, some Muslims spread rumors in the locality that Masih has committed blasphemy by passing remarks against the Prophet Muhammad. It is learnt by the NCJP Faisalabad, that the charge is clearly based on false allegations due to land dispute between the accuser Hameed and the local Christian community of the village, where about 25 Christians are in minority and most of them have been working as laborers. It is also learned that Shahbaz Khalid and Afzaal Bashir who are named in the FIR as witnesses, had political differences with Masih, therefore they tried to involve Masih in the fabricated case in order to take political revenge.

Christian residents of the area are fearful due to attacks by Muslim mob on them as it was commonly happened after such blasphemy incidents. Many Christian families of the Muslim dominated village moved to other areas for safety concerns.

In another latest incident, on June 25, thousands of Muslim people from Chak 35 of Yazman Tehsil, in the Southern Punjab, staged a demonstration against the police for not arresting an alleged Shia blasphemer who had committed blasphemy during his address in the villages' Imambargah, a congregation hall for Shia ritual ceremonies, on May 27. Later on, SHO (Senior House Officer) Irfan Khan had promised to the protestors that the alleged culprit would be arrested in few days. Shia Muslims are in minority in Sunni dominated Pakistan.

The Shia residents of the village are scared due to threats from a banned terrorist outfit, which has strong presence in the area. Bashir Haider, a Shia resident, told a newspaper correspondent that the

people of both sects had been living peacefully in the area for the last 50 years. He said that some miscreants had instigated the matter to foment sectarian hatred among the masses. He demanded an impartial probe into the incident to fix the responsibility. He said that the banned outfit members were threatening them of dire consequences. He said that some miscreants had engraved threatening graffiti on the walls of the Imambargah. He added that the police were ignoring the matter. He feared that a tragic incident could occur if proper steps were not taken to calm down the situation.

Blasphemy laws came into force in the 1980 by General Zia ul Haq, a total number of 1,032 people have been unjustly punished from 1986 to October 2009. President Zia Islamized the country during his 11 years' dictatorial rule. After the introduction of these controversial laws, it became easier to blame religious minorities for insulting Prophet Muhammad, Quran and Islam. Blasphemy legislation provides an institutionalized mechanism hurting religious minorities.

According to a recent report issued by the Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Justice and Peace Commission on the conditions of religious minorities in the country, cases of the blasphemy laws being misused continue at a high rate all over the country. In 2009 no less than 112 cases were registered against 57 Ahmadi, 47 Muslims and 8 Christians, Fides news reported.

During the first week of June, an international petition to repeal Pakistan's blasphemy laws has been launched in France by the Christian advocacy group, Aid to the Church in Need.

Although the present government of Pakistan People's Party declared its willingness to repeal all discriminatory laws, the street power and political clout wielded by Pakistan's religious right have resulted in the state and society being held hostage by extremist elements.

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