

Pakistani Christians are under threat after murder of two Christian brothers outside court

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Two Christian brothers, who were chained together, were gunned down by two suspected Muslim militant gunmen when they left the court under police custody after a trial hearing in Faisalabad city, Punjab province, on July 19 around 1.30pm. Both were immediately taken to Allied Hospital in the city where they pronounced dead. A police officer Mohammad Hussain accompanying them was also seriously wounded. Despite the police's presence the killers easily escaped. The Minorities Concern of Pakistan strongly condemns this heinous incident and demanding that the culprits should be arrested without any delay.

In some areas the clashes came out as a result and at least ten Christians and Muslims were injured. A church was pelted by Muslim protestors with stones and causing extensive damage. The protestors also damaged some shops. Police used tear gas to disperse the crowd. According to police sources, around 60 Muslims were arrested in connections with the clashes. An exchange of fire was also reported between the both communities.

Pastor Rashid Emmanuel, 32, and Sajid Emmanuel, 30, a graduate business student of Faisalabad arrested July 2 under Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws' section 295-C Pakistan Penal Code on the charges of writing a pamphlet with blasphemous remarks about Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). Their funeral held on July 20 at 8am, early in the morning to avoid further clashes between Christians and Muslims.

Right after the attack on Christian brothers the local administration deployed a heavy contingent of police force and enforces Section 144 to control the situation in the town but the tension remains high yet. At around 10pm, on July 19, announcements were made from mosques in Waris Pura asking people to come out to fight against Christians.

The local administration is trying to handle the situation to reconcile the both communities and bring peace in the city. The church leaders are also asking Christian community to remain calm and peaceful. According to a local newspaper report, Regional Police Officer Aftab Cheema and Commissioner Tahir Hussain have held a meeting with Catholic Bishop Joseph Coutts of Faisalabad. Both assured the Church leader of arresting the culprits soon. Additionally, Inspector General of Police, Punjab, Tariq Saleem Dogar has suspended SP (Investigation) Faisalabad, Muhammad Hanif and DSP Civil Lines Ashiq Jutt on account of negligence of duties and ordered departmental proceedings against them.

Just four days ago on July 16, announcements were made from some local mosques against local Christian in Waris Pura area of Faisalabad, the major Christian locality in the city. Angry Muslims also distributed flyers calling for mass action against Christians. Before that Muslim mobs marched July 10-11 in the city demanding the death penalty for both alleged blasphemers. They stoned Holy Rosary Catholic Church in Waris Pura and burnt tires on the roads to show their anger.

Furthermore, they also tried to attack and burn the area where Emmanuel brothers' house was located. The protesters chanted slogans, raised weapons and announced to teach the lesson to the entire Christian community.

Besides, the mob also threatened that if the brothers are not executed according to the blasphemy laws they will take action by themselves.

The local Christians say that the allegation against them was fabricated and no evidence to support the charges against them has emerged. The Minorities Concern of Pakistan learnt that the hand written photo-copied pamphlet, which has so enraged area Muslims, was distributed by unknown persons, yet the names and telephone numbers of the two Christians, Rashid and Sajid, are listed on them.

Shahbaz Bhatti, the federal minister for minority affairs of Pakistan, said the suspected men were falsely accused of blasphemy by people with a grudge against them.

Mehboob Sada, director Christian Study Centre Rawalpindi told Minorities Concern of Pakistan, "It is not possible that somebody can put his name and telephone number on any blasphemous material."

Khurram Shahzad believed to be an activist of Tehrik-i-Hurmat-i-Rasool (peace be upon him), got the two brothers arrested. Surprisingly, he does not live in Faisalabad but lives in another city Samundri. The THR is a newly formed Islamic organization. This raised question that why nobody else filed the complaint against Christian brothers but a person outside the city?

Both brothers were arrested without a legitimate investigation, for blasphemy, Asian Human Rights Commission says.

Christians say that the murder of two Christian men is the result of the negligence of police and the local government authorities and bias attitude of the Punjab government towards religious minorities. Many media reports say that the Punjab government of Pakistan Muslim League has reportedly closed connections with banned militant organizations. Apart from that still there are many sympathizers of extremists are part of the police and establishment which encourage them to attack on religious minorities.

After the murder of the alleged blasphemers, Christians throughout Pakistan are under threat and fear an escalation of violence, just as was the case in Gojra one year ago where nine Christians were burnt alive, many were injured, and more than 120 Christian homes destroyed by a Muslim mob who were enraged about allegation that a Christian in a nearby village had defamed Islam.

According to National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP), 35 Christians and Muslims have been killed extra judicially in connection with allegations involving blasphemy since 1992. Moreover, since 1987 at least 1035 men and women including Muslims, Ahmadis, Christians and Hindus have been accused though none of the allegations sustained or sentence was held by the higher judiciary of the country.

This is not the first incident of its kind but shows the tendency where Christian localities have been targeted because of the alleged allegation of blasphemy and Holy Quran, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Islam. Following are the major occurrences in this regard: Shantinagar (1997), Sangla Hill (2005), Qasur, Korian, Gojra and Sialkot (2009).

False allegations were used to loot and burn properties belonging to Christians in, NCJP, a human rights body of Catholic Bishops Conference of Pakistan, reported.

The blasphemy laws were introduced by President General Zia ul-Haq (a military dictator) in the 1980s to win the support of hard-line religious groups. The Section 295-C of Pakistan Penal Code carries the death penalty. The laws have been criticized by religious minorities and human rights organizations.

Christians are just 1.5 per cent of the total population of the county have been discriminated and persecuted because of their religion.

Father Emmanuel Yousaf and Peter Jacob, the Director and Executive Secretary of NCJP, a human rights body of Catholic Bishops Conference of Pakistan, said that the Christian community in Pakistan is deeply concerned over the apathy on part of the government about the abuse of blasphemy laws. They demanded an immediate action to deal with situation. The government should immediately conduct a thorough review of the blasphemy laws and repeal them on account of their known disastrous effects on the society.

The Asian Human Rights Commission demands that the government should also follow the amendment made in the blasphemy laws that no FIR for blasphemy can be filed without an officer of the rank of Superintendent of Police. Therefore the government should take action against those responsible police officers who, without proper investigations, filed the FIR for blasphemy against two Christian men at the pressure from some Muslim extremist groups. ###

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