

Christians Burned to Death in Islamist Attacks in Pakistan

Islamic extremists on Saturday set ablaze more than 50 houses and a church in **Gorja**, a town in northeastern Pakistan following an accusation of “blasphemy” of the Quran, leaving at least 14 Christians dead, sources said.

The dead include women and children, with several other burn victims unable to reach hospitals for medical care, according to the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS). The attack came amid a protest by thousands of Muslim Islamists – including members of banned militant groups – that resulted in another six people dying when participants shot at police and officers responded with tear gas and gunfire.

The same rumor of desecration of the Quran that led to today’s massive protest and attack in Gojra, 50 kilometers (31 miles) from

Faisalabad, also prompted an arson assault on July 30 by Islamic extremists on the village of Korian, seven miles from Gojra, that gutted 60 houses.

Punjab Minister for Law Rana Sanaullah reportedly said an initial investigation of allegations of the Quran being blasphemed indicated “there has not been any incident of desecration.”

Because of the earlier assault in Korian, Pakistani officials were already in the area and had sought reinforcements to help control the 11 a.m. demonstration today in Gojra, but security forces were slow to respond, according to CLAAS.

“There were unaccountable people in the mob and they were out of control because only four police constables were trying to stop the mob of thousands of people,” a CLAAS report said.

Crowd size and attacks grew, and Islamists managed to block main roads

and railways to keep fire brigades from fighting the house fires, according to CLAAS.

With authorities also blocking roads to keep more Muslim extremists from entering from neighboring villages, clerics at local mosques broadcast messages that those “who love Muhammad and Islam should gather with them to defend the Islam because it is in danger,” according to CLAAS.

In response to the police road closures, Islamists became more aggressive and began burning property using firearms and explosives in nearby hamlets where primarily Christians live, according to CLAAS.

“About 20 houses have been burnt in Chauck No. 424, and valuable things have been stolen from about 100 Christian houses,” according to the CLAAS statement.

Asam Masih, a Christian in Gojra, said that that women and children were severely burned and had no way to get to a hospital, according to CLAAS, which was helping to transport victims for medical care.

Islamists set on fire a Catholic church on Sumandri road and destroyed it using firearms and explosives, according to CLAAS.

“50 houses are burned and totally destroyed,” the CLAAS statement read. “14 people including children, women and men are expired.”

Wedding and Funeral

As Christians have begun defending themselves against the onslaughts, mainstream media have already begun referring to the overwhelmingly Islamist aggression as “Christian and Muslim rioting.”

Compass investigated the facts of the trigger incident in the village of Korian, where more than 500 Muslims, responding to calls from a mosque, attacked Christians in Toba Tek Singh district. Local sources said nearly all village Christian families fled. The fires destroyed their homes – collapsing their wooden roofs or melting T-iron roofs – and all belongings within that the attacking Muslims had not first

looted.

"Our house is burnt and everything is gone, but Muslim neighbors around are not willing to give us a loaf of bread or a sip of water to us," 80-year-old Baba Sharif Masih told Compass.

He and his wife Hanifa Bibi, 73, were the only Christians left in the village in the northeastern province of Punjab. Masih, who is paralyzed, said the attackers let them live when they pleaded that they were unable to run away.

Two church buildings were ransacked but not burned, Compass sources said.

One Christian resident of Korian identified only as Shabir said the blasphemy accusation grew out of an incident at a wedding on July 25. During the ceremony, Christian wedding guests tossed currency notes and coins into the air according to custom, with children catching most of them as they fall. Shabir told Compass a Muslim funeral was taking place at the same time, however, and that mourners told wedding celebrants to stop their music; they apparently declined.

The next day, Muslims met with the parents of the bride, Talib and Mukhtar Masih, and told them that their sons had cut pages of the Quran the size of currency notes and had been throwing them in the air the previous night, Shabir said.

"Talib said that nothing like this has happened, but that if there was anything, 'I'll call my son and he will definitely apologize for it,'" Shabir said. "But then they immediately began beating them and left Talib when he fell unconscious."

Shabir said that afterward when Christian women went to the Muslims and told them that they were wrong to beat Talib Masih, the assailants yelled at them and tried to attack them, but they were able to flee to their homes.

On July 30, Shabir said, Muslim clerics announced from the village mosque that "if any infidel Christian wanted to save his or her life, then get out of here or they would be killed."

As the Muslim mobs gathered, he said, Christians immediately fled – leaving their meals prepared and fires burning in stoves.

“These assailants first looted these houses and then set them on fire and closed the door,” he said. “Since then, not a single Christian is left there except a very old couple.”

Islamist’s Version

Village Muslims declined to open their doors when Compass reporters called on them.

But one of three Muslim leaders standing with a crowd of turban-clad Islamists at the entrance to the village, Qari Noor Ahmed, told Compass the story of the alleged cut pages of the Quran at the marriage ceremony.

“Because it was night, no one noticed, but in the morning we saw that the pages of the Quran had been cut to currency note size, and they were trampled under people’s feet,” he said.

Ahmed said that village authorities later met and called in Talib and Mukhtar Masih. He said that council authorities decided that their son should apologize.

“But when his son came in the meeting, he by no means seemed apologetic, rather he was aggressive,” Ahmed said. “This was the root cause, and we told Talib and Mukhtar to tell their children to apologize.”

Ahmed said that afterwards they searched for Talib and Mukhtar Masih and their sons but could not find them.

“Then Muslims became furious that first they had profaned the Quran, and now they had fled and were not apologizing,” Ahmed said. “Then the villagers attacked their houses. All the Christians who are visiting here are armed, and we are sitting here to avoid any untoward incident. It is better for you to leave now or you may be attacked.”

Munawar Masih, a 20-year-old Christian in Korian, said that he was

preparing supper around 7 p.m. when he heard the announcement from the mosque that “infidel Christians had profaned the Holy Quran, and let’s teach them exemplary lesson.”

He looked outside as his family was about to sit down to dinner and saw a large mob approaching.

“We just fled from there to save our lives, and since then we are hiding in Gojra,” he said.

Private TV channel reporter Ghulam Muhaiddin told Compass that after the Korian houses were set on fire, the Islamic extremists blocked the Faisalabad-Gojra Highway to keep firefighters from arriving.

“When the attack was unleashed, several people were injured and even some domestic animals were killed,” he said.

Muhaiddin said that after negotiations between the District Police Officer and the protestors, Station House Officer (SHO) Jamshed Iqbal Nasir was suspended for not properly handling the incident.

Christians Accused

Officials at the Sadar Police Station, in whose precincts the attack took place, were not available for comment, but a deputy called Imam Din said that a First Information Report (FIR) had been filed under Section 295-B, or blasphemy of the Quran, against Talib and Mukhtar Masih.

He said that the complainant in the case was Muhammad Ashraf, and that police had possession of the alleged burnt or cut papers of the Quran. Din said that after SHO Nasir was suspended and Ashiq Hussein replaced him, Hussein was willing to file an FIR against those who had ransacked and burned houses of Christians. He said the accused were still at large and that police would arrest them after Christians returned to their homes.

Asked if police were under pressure from Islamists or the government, Din declined to comment.

Advocacy group Community Development Initiative (CDI) field officer Napoleon Qayyum said that the group had informed high officials about the Korian attack, including the presidency, and that soon afterward the president issued a notice. Qayyum noted that the Korian and Gojra attacks follow a July 1 attack in Kasur, where swarms of Islamists ransacked and damaged 110 homes.

"It is a clear sign that violent attacks against Christians have dramatically increased in recent days," he said, adding that CDI would provide legal help to victims. CDI works with assistance from the American Centre of Law and Justice.

Muhaiddin of the private TV channel added that Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif had taken the notice of the attacks and was forming an investigative team comprising the Faisalabad Regional Police Officer and Faisalabad Commissioner, which will send a report to him.

A spokesman from the Pakistani president's office, former Sen. Farhatullah Babar, told Compass that President Asif Ali Zardari had taken a notice of the attack and had asked the provincial government to investigate. He said the president has condemned the attack and that there was no justification for anyone taking the law into their own hands.

Asked why the committee constituted by the provincial government did not have any Christians on it, he responded that it was the discretion of the provincial government to determine the make-up of the panel and that the federal government was concerned only about the report. Asked why an FIR had been filed against Christians and not Muslims for ransacking and vandalizing, he said only that appropriate action would be taken after the inquiry.

Member of National Assembly Farahnaz Ispahani, wife of Pakistani Ambassador to the United States Husain Haqqani, told Compass that President Zardari had directed Federal Minorities Affairs Minister Shahbaz Bhatti to visit the area and "express sympathy with the victims."

