

Christians in Pakistan Face Increased Threat of Attacks

Since Sept. 11, 2001, and the start of the war on terror, violence against believers has become more common

Christians in Pakistan have been the targets of a number of recent terrorist attacks in random violence that has become increasingly common since Sept. 11, 2001, and the onset of the United States-led war on terrorism.

“Muslim fanatics associate Christians in Pakistan with ‘Christian’ America,” said Ann Buwalda, U.S. director of the international human rights organization Jubilee Campaign. “They justify killing innocent believers, including women and children, as a reprisal against the West.”

On Jan. 15, a church compound in Karachi was rocked by a grenade blast. Fifteen minutes later, a car bomb exploded outside the complex, injuring nearly a dozen police officers and bystanders. Similar attacks in Chianwali, Islamabad and Bahawalpur have Pakistani Christians on edge.

Unlike many Muslim nations, the Pakistani government allows Christians—roughly 2 percent of the population—a great deal of religious freedom, yet they are afforded little state protection. On Jan. 25 three Muslim men opened fire in a Sunday service in Patoki. Though the men were easily identified, the police made no immediate arrests.

“The position of Christians in today’s Pakistan is that of a

wounded traveler on the way to Jericho,” said former Pakistan High Court Judge M.L. Shahani. “The [Pakistani government] ... has refused to look after the injured traveler by refusing to afford proper security to churches and Christian organizations.”

Today many churches employ armed guards and screen congregants with metal detectors. Despite the ongoing hostility, the Catholic renewal movement is growing, and many churches are hosting large retreats that include healing services. Such services used to be attended by Muslims; however, it has become increasingly dangerous to minister to or evangelize Muslim seekers.

In January Mukhtar Masih, the pastor of a small Church of God congregation, was gunned down over a dispute with a local mosque about the church’s use of loud speakers—a common practice in Christian communities.

Meanwhile, Pakistani believers say the nation’s blasphemy laws—which carry a mandatory death sentence—are used to silence Christians and settle disputes. Anwer Masih, a young Christian laborer, is currently on trial for insulting a local troublemaker, who allegedly brought the charge as payback for an old grudge.

The Center for Legal Aid, Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS) is a Christian organization that provides legal representation and financial support for persecuted Pakistani believers. CLAAS leaders claim that during blasphemy trials, the judicial system is held hostage by Muslim fanatics who pack courtrooms and threaten judges, defense lawyers and the accused. Both a judge and a defense lawyer have been murdered in connection with blasphemy acquittals.

One defendant, Manzoor Masih, was shot dead after a High Court proceeding. Another defendant, Ayub Masih, was shot by his accuser during a trial, yet the accuser was never criminally charged. Ayub Masih survived but was kept in solitary confinement for his own protection until his acquittal four years later. Thanks largely to CLAAS, to date every Christian accused of blasphemy—who survived prison—has been acquitted.

To varying degrees, every Christian in Pakistan is at risk. Poorer Christian women, who are particularly vulnerable to rape, are denied justice because of a nearly impossible burden of proof, CLAAS officials said. However, Natasha Emmanuel, a 10-year-old Christian raped in March 2003 by a Muslim neighbor, was for the first time able to circumvent the requirement to have two male witnesses testify to the rape by using DNA evidence, which led to her rapist's conviction.

Many Christians are not so fortunate. In January, six Christians were arbitrarily arrested after a failed assassination attempt on Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf. These Christians, who say they are innocent, happened to be in the same train compartment as members of a dangerous Muslim group.

"To be Christian in Pakistan is to walk daily in the valley of death," said CLAAS founder Joseph Francis. "Yet we must never to give up hope, never to cease praying, and never to stop striving for justice."

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with Adrienne S. Gaines