

Christians in Pakistan Fear Further Firestorms

✖ **LAHORE, Pakistan** – In the wake of Islamists setting fires that killed at least seven people in Punjab Province last month, the latest of several attempts to provoke further attacks on Christians took place in a village on Friday when unidentified men tore pages of the Quran and left them at a church.

Police said they were able to cool tensions in Chak 8-11-L Mission Village, near Chichawatni, after the torn pages of the Muslim scriptures were left at the Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church and on a nearby road. Sources said they have witnessed similar attempts to ignite attacks on Christians in several areas of Punjab Province since an Islamic mob on Aug. 1 burned seven Christians alive in Gojra over a false accusation of blaspheming the Quran.

Superintendent of Police Ahmed Nawaz Cheema said the pages of the Quran were left at the dividing line between Chak 8's Christian-inhabited Mission village and the Muslim-populated Maliks village, indicating "it was planted to create tensions between the two villages."

Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church Pastor Salmoon Ejaz told Compass that Muslim women on their way to glean cotton early in the morning had found the torn pages of the Quran. They took the pages to local Muslim clerics, who in turn took them to the police. Pastor Ejaz said the clerics came to Christian leaders and told them they had no suspicion that Christians had torn the pages, and that both Muslims and Christians should be vigilant and try to find the culprit.

Since then, the pastor said, the situation has been tense but under control, with police fully cooperating.

"The situation is calm, and we have no fear from the local Muslims, but the real threat is from the *madrassas* of Chak 11-11-L, 81-9-L and Multan Road," said the pastor of the church, which was founded in 1906. "Even in Gojra the local Muslims had not attacked, but outsiders were the assailants, and that is the reason we are still frightened."

In Gojra, members of the banned *Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan*, a pro-Taliban, Sunni Muslim group, and its al Qaeda-linked offshoot, *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi*, were suspected of planning the attack that killed the Christians and injured at least 19 others. Urged on by clerics from mosque loudspeakers, the rampaging Islamists set fire to 50 homes and looted more than 100 houses.

Christian advocacy group Community Development Initiative (CDI) Field Officer Napoleon Qayyum said al Qaeda remnants have lost support following a Pakistani military operation in tribal areas along the Afghanistan border, and that to regain backing they were trying to exploit anti-U.S. and anti-Christian sentiment. He said well-coordinated efforts were underway to instigate Muslims against Christians by inciting hatred against the United States and the Pakistani government, a U.S. ally in anti-terrorism efforts. In this way, he said, the al Qaeda militants justify terrorist activities against the Pakistani government.

"Terrorism is like the AIDS virus, which keeps changing its tactics," Qayyum said.

CDI helped to encourage police to increase security in the Mission Village area, he added.

Superintendent of Police Cheema said 50 policemen had been stationed in the area to prevent potential conflicts and would remain there until rumors died down. Christian leaders outside the district had contacted area police warning that Islamists could try to spark violence.

"These Christians have a good liaison with the Christians of other districts and cities," he said.

Muslims in Maliks were cooperating fully with police to keep conflict from erupting, he said, adding that area Muslims were concerned that Christians in the 400-home Mission Village were not sending their children to school, which is located in the Maliks village of 2,000 Muslim homes. Cheema said area Muslims had indicated that if Christians were afraid, they would be willing to go to the Christian colony and bring their children to school.

Tensions after Gojra

The rumor of desecration of the Quran that led to the attack in Gojra, 31 miles from Faisalabad, on July 30 had prompted an Islamist arson assault on Korian village, seven miles from Gojra, that gutted 60 houses.

On June 30, a cleric in Kasur district's Bahmaniwala village used a mosque loudspeaker to announce a call to attack Christians that resulted in more than 500 Muslims ransacking and looting at least 110 houses. Chief Minister of the Punjab Shahbaz Sharif has ordered the arrest of six Muslim extremists, including suspected mastermind Qari Latif.

On Aug. 1, as houses in Gojra were burned and plundered, Muslim clerics called for demonstrations to protest the arrest of Islamists suspected in the Kasur violence. Pakistan People's Party's Provincial Assembly Member Ahmed Riaz Tohlu and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz's National Assembly Member Sheikh Wasim resolved the issue by assuring Christians that Kasur would remain secure and by promising the Islamists that the arrested Muslims would be released. The officials told the provincial deputy general inspector, however, that the names of the released Muslims "should be the first to be mentioned in the FIR [First Information Report] if any untoward incident

takes place.”

Potential tensions were also warded off in Shantinagar, a village near Khanewal that suffered a massive onslaught from Islamic extremists in 1997, after another incident involving the Quran on Aug. 8. District Councilor Chaudhry Salamat Allah Rakha told Compass that when one of the village Christians went out in the fields, he saw a bearded person holding something.

“That man yelled at him, at which point the other man ran away,” Rakha said. “This man tried to catch him but failed, and then he saw that there were three Qurans wrapped in a white cloth.”

The Christian suspected the bearded man who fled intended to tear pages of the Quran in order to frame Christians for blasphemy. District Councilor Wazir Jacob arrived at the site and called police, and Sadar police station House Officer Chaudhry Zaka came soon after and seized the three Qurans.

Rakha said that police were asked to file a First Information Report on the incident, but the district police officer refused on grounds that it would create tensions in the area.

Tensions were simmering in St. Henry Colony in Lahore after an altercation over an inconveniently parked car led to a gang fight. Local Pastor Azam Anthony told Compass that on Aug. 6 a Muslim family parked a car close to the front of a house owned by Christians, and a Christian woman came out of the house and asked them to move as it hampered their ability to enter.

“At this the Muslim woman dragged her by her hair, and the Christian woman in her effort to release herself got hold of her *shalwar* [a garment like trousers],” Pastor Anthony said. A man with the Muslim woman grew furious and began beating the Christian woman, he said.

“The sight further incited Christian boys there who were

watching this all going on,” he said. “They asked that man why did he beat a woman, and they beat the man.”

The Muslim man gathered other Muslims, along with a Muslim councilor of the area, and began fighting the Christian boys. Pastor Anthony said that before leaving, the Muslims said they would deal with the Christians after Friday prayers.

“That afternoon was quite tense, and Christians of the area had prepared themselves for another Gojra incident,” Pastor Anthony said. The timely intervention of Christian leaders and police has averted any further incidents – so far.

In the wake of the Gojra attack, Christians have deliberated whether to arm themselves so they can defend themselves against further attacks. One Christian, Naveed Masih, who fired into the air as the Islamist throng attacked, has been credited with reducing the number of casualties and damages. Dubbed Naveed the Soldier, he was the only man with a rifle when the mobs charged Gojra. Several Christian women had taken refuge in his house.

A Muslim association based in Gojra, the Muslim Mahaz Tanzeem for Peace, has since tried to blame Masih for setting off the violence and charged three priests and another Christian with providing him weapons. According to Asia News, the association has threatened another Islamist wave of violence unless the four Christians are arrested.

District Councilor Rakha said that since the attack, about 15 boys have been armed and trained to keep watch at night. Christians in other areas, such as Youhanabad and Bahar Colony in Lahore, told Compass that they would rather die defending themselves than be killed doing nothing.

Petition for Prosecution

In view of the increase in attacks against Christians in Pakistan, the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) has filed a petition with the United Nations through its European body, the European Center for Law and Justice.

"We have expressed in the strongest terms possible that the Pakistani government must prosecute acts of violence based upon religion," said Jay Sekulow, Chief Counsel of the ECLJ and the ACLJ. "Christians are being singled out and murdered because of their faith. Only when the Pakistani government effectively prosecutes those responsible for the acts of violence will attacks against Christians end."

The "blasphemy laws" that encourage Muslim violence against Christians violate the principle of the universality of religious freedom to which Pakistan officially adheres, Sekulow said.

The ECLJ petition calls on Pakistan to prosecute deadly attacks on Christians, which have claimed the lives of at least 60 Christians in the past decade in at least 27 separate incidents of Muslim-on-Christian violence. The ECLJ filing states: "More than two decades of blasphemy laws have taught Pakistani Muslims that the punishment for allegedly insulting Islam is death. The Pakistani government must repeal or procedurally change blasphemy laws."

Because Pakistan has proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in a resolution to the U.N. that it presented on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, it should abide by those terms for its own religious minorities, the ECLJ petition states.