

Pakistan: Christians Strive for Justice Following Onslaught

✖ A standoff in Gorja, Pakistan, between authorities and Christians protesting the government's reluctance to prosecute a murderous Islamic assault ended with officials finally consenting to file a complaint against key Muslim clerics and security officers.

On Sunday hundreds of Christians demonstrated in Gojra, where the previous day rampaging Muslims – acting on an unsubstantiated rumor of “blasphemy” of the Quran and whipped into a frenzy by local imams and banned terrorist groups – killed at least seven Christians, looted more than 100 houses and set fire to 50 of them. At least 19 people were injured in the melee.

In protest of government reluctance to name two security officers for negligence in connection with Christians burned to death, demonstrators on Sunday refused to quickly bury the dead as officials requested.

Believing the government was stalling in registering a complaint, demonstrators put the coffins with the charred remains on railroad tracks for three hours before officials agreed to include District Police Officer (DPO) Inkasar Khan and District Coordinating Officer (DCO) Sikandar Baloch in the complaint filed against more than 20 named and 800 unnamed people.

Among those arrested include members of the banned *Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan*, a pro-Taliban, Sunni Muslim group, and its al Qaeda-linked offshoot, *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi*; officials said members of both groups were suspected of planning the attack in Gojra.

The Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS) reported that at least 14 Christians had been killed, and Christians in the affected areas told Compass the final death toll will likely be more than 20.

The only deaths confirmed by hospital officials, however, are those of seven members of a family who died when their home was set on fire; names and ages in this report vary slightly from the hospital list as they are based on Compass contact with their survivors: Hameed Masih, 75; his son Akhlaq Hameed, 55; Asia Hameed, 22, wife of Mohsin Hameed; her mother Parveen, 50; Asifa Hameed, 30 (wife of survivor Almas Hameed), and her 8-year-old daughter Umia and 4-year-old son Musa.

With the caskets containing the remains of the dead Christians sitting in public for some time, the local administration tried to force survivors to conduct a hasty funeral, telling them to hold a service in Catholic parish hall and bury the dead as soon as possible.

Federal Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti and other prominent Christians met with the local administration, but negotiations failed as the two security officials were not named in the First Information report (FIR). A Catholic priest identified only as Father Mani then told protestors that an FIR had been registered and that he had seen it, and that therefore the demonstration should be called off.

But protestors did not believe him, insisting that they would not quit until they saw a copy of the FIR. Only after continued protests, with the dead bodies on the railway track for more than three hours, did officials register a case against key suspects in connection with murder, looting and violence: more than 20 identified people, including DPO Khan and DCO Baloch, who are accused of negligence in allowing the Islamic violence to erupt, and some 800 unidentified suspects.

Nevertheless, sources told Compass, the two officers have not

been suspended, terminated or arrested. Rather, they have been made Special Duty Officers—an officer who is fully paid but has yet to be posted.

The FIR also names Muslim clerics of several Gojra mosques, including the imam of nearby Chamra Mandi Mosque, called Firdausia Mosque. Muslim groups held a press conference today in Gojra calling on the government to free clerics named in the FIR, according to CLAAS. They also threatened to hang Talib Masih, father of the boy who was falsely accused of tossing cut pages of the Quran into the air as part of a wedding ceremony in Korian.

The same rumor of desecration of the Quran that led to Saturday's massive protest and attack in Gojra, located 31 miles from Faisalabad, also prompted the arson assault last Thursday by Islamic extremists on the village of Korian, seven miles from Gojra.

In the Gojra violence, several people have also implicated Qadir Awan, president of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) in Gojra, who was also named in the FIR. Zahid Iqbal, administrative head of a section of Gojra called Union Council-21, said that Awan had no role in the rioting.

The bodies of the seven Christians had been kept in the mortuary of Civil Hospital in Gojra, where the Christian advocacy group called Community Development Initiative (CDI) helped wash the bodies and facilitated their transfer to the families.

Government Response

Amid strict security, a funeral service for the victims of the Gojra riots' victims took place on Sunday. Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah and Minorities Affairs Minister Bhatti participated in the funeral procession.

There Sanaullah announced that Punjab Chief Minister Sharif would visit the Christian community to express his condolences – “Beyond the FIR we are with you in punishing those who let this conspiracy succeed or participated in this conspiracy,” Sanaullah said – but Christians were disappointed the next day when he didn’t show.

Christians refused to speak with the representatives the chief minister had sent in his stead nor with other PML-N members. Provincial Minorities Minister Kamran Michael threatened to resign over the issue, and due to this pressure Chief Minister Sharif visited the area Tuesday, assuring the community that he would do his utmost to provide justice.

To assess the damage, the chief minister has constituted a 16-member group under the chairmanship of Michael.

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has formed a committee to ascertain the amount of damage done during the rioting, and as soon as President Asif Ali Zardari learned of the incident he sent Minorities Minister Bhatti to Gojra.

President Zardari also announced that 500,000 rupees (\$6,040) will be made available for each person killed and 300,000 rupees (\$3,624) for those whose houses were burned. Prime Minister Gilani is also expected to announce a special package for the affected families.

A report submitted by Bhatti to the president states that the Punjab government and local administration failed to stem the violence. It adds that additional troops were not sent to help local authorities in Gojra, despite the advice of the minorities minister.

Interior Minister Rehman Malik has also sought a report from the interior secretary and the Punjab inspector general.

Farahnaz Ispahani, spokesperson for President Zardari, told Compass that after Muslims burned more than 50 homes in Korian

village on Thursday and Friday— following the accusation of “blasphemy” of the Quran that proved to be false – the president asked the Punjabi government to report on it. After the subsequent Aug. 1 rioting in Gojra, she said, he immediately dispatched Bhatti to the site with orders to report back.

Ispahani said that after the president talked to Prime Minister Gilani, the prime minister called Chief Minister of the Punjab Sharif over the incident. When it became clear that police were unable to handle the matter, she said, the president ordered Rangers – paramilitary troops mainly deployed along the border for security –into Gojra to take charge and save Christians from further damage.

CDI Field Officer Napoleon Qayyum told Compass that CDI had strongly objected to the route of the Aug. 1 Islamic demonstration – which had been called to protest the release of the man whose son was falsely accused of desecrating pages of the Quran – saying he had told DPO Khan that it should not pass by any churches or Christian areas. As Islamic clerics made threatening announcements from mosques the day before the rampage, Qayyum said, DCO Baloch also had ample warning that violence was imminent.

“The way things were moving in Gojra, no rocket science was needed to predict this fallout,” he said, adding that announcements from loudspeakers mounted on vehicles broadcast how Christians had supposedly desecrated the Quran.

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

The CDI also objected to a two-member committee set up by provincial Chief Minister Sharif regarding violence in Korian village.

“Our objection was that no Christian was on the committee,”

Qayyum said, "because how could administration and police be thought to be unbiased? It was the first step where the provincial government showed partiality."

After Korian village Christians were attacked, the government showed no interest in arresting or reining in rampaging mobs, according to Qayyum, who said that the day after that assault he saw crowds there still armed with clubs wearing green, dark brown or black turbans, an indication that "religious fanatics were still roaming free."

Likewise, he added, the provincial government allowed the civil administration and police to use delaying tactics in June 30 violence in Bahmaniwala village, where 110 houses were plundered and ransacked in Kasur.

Christians make up less than 5 percent of Pakistan's 175 million population, which is mainly Muslim.