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Muslim

employers of three Christian sanitation workers at a banquet/wedding hall in Gujranwala, Pakistan,

allegedly poisoned the three workers Monday, killing two of them. At press time the third was struggling for life in intensive care.

The father of the three workers, Yousaf Masih, said the owner of the hall, along with the manager, poisoned his sons because they were Christians who had dared to ask for pay owed to them.

Imran Masih, 29, and Irfan Masih, 25, died at the Ferozewala Pul Banquet & Marriage Hall after being forced to drink something that was heavily poisoned, Yousaf Masih said.

The third worker, 23-year-old Aakash Masih, was in critical condition at the Intensive Care Unit of Civil Hospital Gujranwala, in Punjab Province.

“It appears from the position they were in that they were forced to consume some

kind of poisoned
drink, or a drug, and they were left there to die,” Yousaf Masih said. “The
administration of the banquet and wedding hall did not call a
hospital or take
them to a hospital—instead they called us after the death of
two of our loved
ones.”

The Peoples Colony
police station has registered a murder and deception case
against Imtiyas
Warriach, owner of the Ferozewala Pul Banquet & Marriage Hall,
and hall
manager Abid Virk. At press time they remained at large.

The chief of the
Peoples Colony police station was not available for comment,
but an officer told
Compass that the two suspects would be arrested soon.

The family learned of
the deaths when another of Yousaf Masih’s sons, 21-year-old
Javed Masih,
received a telephone call at home from the owner, Warriach,
saying that his
older brother Imran Masih was lying dead on the floor of the
wedding
hall.

Because they had not
been paid, the three brothers had left the hall to work
elsewhere before
returning this past weekend. Javed Masih said he spoke by
telephone on Friday
with Warriach, when the owner called asking for his three
brothers to
return to work.

“The owner and manager of the wedding hall called me in the early morning of Dec. 11 and pleaded for my three brothers to rejoin and start working,” Javed Masih said. “They promised to reimburse their previous outstanding wages, as well as pay them a Christmas bonus and overtime. At this my brothers agreed and went to work the next morning.”

When Yousaf and Javed Masih were summoned to the wedding hall yesterday, they found Imran Masih and Irfan Masih dead. Aakash Masih was alive but lying still on the floor, they said.

Yousaf Masih said his sons had long told him that owner Warriach and manager Virk refused to pay their daily wages, and that the managers and staff members at the hall spoke derogatorily to them for being Christians.

“On demand of their daily wages, the owner and manager had threatened them that they would continue to work without payment or face the dire consequences,” Yousaf Masih said.

“After my sons rejoined as sanitation workers, both Warriach and Virk started to make fun of them for leaving the job previously. Both the Muslim men mocked my sons for being Christian and called them by pejorative names such as ‘Choohra.’”

Yousaf Masih, 47, told

Compass at the Sargodha offices of human rights group Rays of Development

Organization that his sons had worked at the same wedding hall since the day it

opened in 2005. Sobbing, he said that the owner and manager had never paid them

their full wages during that time, so they had begun looking for other work a

few weeks before the Islamic festival of sacrifice, called Eid-ul-Azha.

Muslims refrain from

marrying during the Islamic month of

Muharram, so in the small window of time between the start of that month and the end of the Eid-ul-Azha festival, wedding halls thrive and require all available help, he said.

Javed Masih said the

bodies of Imran Masih and Irfan Masih were moved to the morgue at Civil Hospital

Gujranwala for autopsy.