

Islamists in Pakistan Kill ‘Blasphemy’ Accused, Four Others

Christian accused of desecrating Quran shot; 5-year-old among those slain in separate attack.

Police

suspect two Muslim extremists shot a Christian to death Thursday in Punjab Province shortly after the victim was granted bail in a “blasphemy” case – and less than a week after Islamist militants killed four members of a Christian family for their faith in the same province.

In Godhpur village in Narowal district, 111 kilometers (69 miles) northeast of Lahore, 22-year-old Latif Masih died after two men with pistols shot him to death near his home. Inspector Rafique Ahmed said that Masih’s murder was likely linked to the case against him for allegedly desecrating the Quran.

“No Muslim tolerates a man who commits blasphemous acts,” he said.

Masih, a member of the United Presbyterian Church, was accused of burning pages of the Quran in a case registered at Godhpur police station in June and had spent five months in jail. He was released on bail on Nov. 3 after the complainant in the case, Ijaz Ahmed, told the court that he was not sure that Masih was guilty, police said. Masih’s mother Rubina Bibi, 60, said two men armed with

pistols knocked at the door of their house on Nov. 18 and asked him to accompany them.

"A few yards from the house, they suddenly opened fire," she said, adding that Masih was shot five times. She said the attackers fled by motorbike. "There were policemen present in the street, but no one tried to stop them," she said. Junaid Masih, the victim's brother, said Latif Masih was innocent of the blasphemy charge. He said that Ahmed had filed the charge because he was trying to take possession of his brother's shop. "My brother bought a mobile shop in the village," he said. "He displayed a cross inside. Ijaz Ahmed is the son of the local Muslim cleric, and he came to Latif's shop and threw the cross out and demanded that he leave the shop."

Junaid Masih added that he suspected Ahmed had arranged for two Muslim associates who were with him when he threw out the cross to kill his brother.

Inspector Ibrahim Shah told Compass that when Ahmed filed a complaint in June accusing Latif Masih of burning pages of the Quran and speaking against Islam, he had ulterior motives.

"He also demanded that I help him in getting the shop," Shah said. "While arresting Latif Masih, Ahmed kept saying that he will ensure that no Christian can live or buy a shop in Godhpur village."

Human rights activists condemned the incident as another

example of the
havoc wrought by Pakistan's widely condemned blasphemy laws. Dr. Altaf Hasan,
chairman of the Human Rights Foundation-Pakistan, said both the judiciary and
the government were afraid of the laws – judges fear being attacked for
acquitting those accused of blasphemy, and government officials defend the laws
for the same reason.

"If anyone accused is acquitted by the court, society becomes hostile to
him, and this hostility only ends with his death," Hasan said. "Killing a
blasphemy accused is considered jihad."

Family Members Slain

In Mehmoodabad near Multan in southern Punjab Province, 356 kilometers (221
miles) from Lahore, police believe six militants belonging to the Islamist
terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Taiba on Nov. 12 killed four family members
because of their Christian faith.

Multan District Coordination Officer (DCO) Taimoor Shahid Jadoon instructed
Multan police to register a First Information Report against six as yet unnamed
members of Lashkar-e-Taiba after the family members were found inside their
house in Mehmoodabad.

Dead on the scene were two grown children of 42-year-old schoolteacher
Shahista Iqbal Gill – 23-year-old Atif Iqbal Gill and 21-year-old Tehreem Iqbal
Gill – as well as her 25-year-old sister-in-law, identified only as Gulshan.
Another of Shahista Iqbal Gill's children, 5-year-old Imran Iqbal Gill, later

succumbed to his wounds in the hospital.

A fourth child, Arsalan Iqbal Gill, 18, was in serious condition from his wounds. Both he and his 5-year-old brother bore strangulation marks on their necks.

Shahista Iqbal Gill said she and her husband Javed Iqbal Gill moved to the area from Toba Tek Singh six months ago with their four children and sister-in-law Gulshan, renting a house in Mehmoodabad colony close to Government Islamia High School and attending the Pentecostal King of Kings Church in Multan.

“Initially things were quite peaceful for three or four weeks,” she told Compass. “But when the staff and the children came to know that I am a Christian, their behavior changed towards me. They even started discriminating against my children at school. After three months, the staff started abusing me.”

She said she tried to complain, but school administrators were unresponsive. Some students from a *madrassa* (Islamic school) near Mehmoodabad found out that a Christian family had moved to the area and began monitoring them.

Arsalan Iqbal Gill was able to comment to Compass from his hospital bed.

“A few weeks ago I was playing cricket with some boys in the street,” he said. “Around five or six young men came – they were wearing

white dress and
green turbans – and they took me by my collar and asked me to
leave town and
never come back.”

Shahista Iqbal Gill said that she began receiving threats that
they must
leave the area; Lashkar-e-Taiba extremists called her saying
that no non-Muslims
were allowed to live there.

The madrassa students also assaulted her son Atif Iqbal Gill a
few weeks
prior, she said, but when she complained about that and the
threats, the school
administrator was deaf to her pleas. Pastor Dilshad Gill of
King of Kings Church
told Compass that she and her family told him about the
assault and the
threats, and he suggested she file a complaint with police.
She feared doing so,
he said.

On Nov. 11, Shahista Iqbal Gill spent the night visiting one
of her
relatives. Her husband was living in Toba Tek Singh while
recovering from a
broken leg following a car accident. The extremists came to
her home and
attacked, shooting Atif and Tehreem and cutting the throats of
Imran and
Gulshan, according to police. Imran was initially considered
dead, but when
examined he still had a pulse, and he died in the hospital.

Neighbor Aamir Ali described what he witnessed.

“We heard the gunshots, screaming and yelling in the early
morning,” he
said. “As I came out, eight to 10 masked men wearing green
turbans escaped in

two vehicles,” Toyota Hilux pickup trucks.

Initially police thought the murders seemed to be the result of a family dispute, but after taking statements from the neighbors and examining Shahista Iqbal Gill’s phone records, DCO Jadoon thought otherwise.

“The numbers taken from Shahista’s phone records belong to the members of Lashkar-e-Taiba,” he said. “They had been threatening Shahista and her family.”

The DCO has instructed police to register a case against six members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, with their names undetermined until they issue a report in two weeks.

After hearing about the murders, relatives of the victims on Nov. 14 left Multan for their native town in Toba Tek Singh.