

Pakistan: Abused in Allah's Name

Authorities routinely turn a blind eye to injustices against Christians, yet believers hold fast to their love for their Savior—and their enemies.

Her crime, the cause of all her trouble, is being a Christian in the Muslim nation of Pakistan. She bears scars both on her body and in her psyche, but she willingly endures them to wear the name of Christ.

Last year, 16-year-old Safeena was imprisoned on false charges of theft while working as a housekeeper for a wealthy Muslim family. One of the sons, taken with Safeena's dark brown eyes and warm smile, determined to make her his wife. But marrying Safeena required that she convert to Islam. Though the family pressured her constantly, Safeena refused to deny her faith.

"I am a Christian," she told them repeatedly.

Leaving her job would devastate her own impoverished family. In Pakistan, education and employment opportunities are limited for Christians. Believers often are able to find jobs only as street sweepers or brick kiln workers. Cooking and cleaning for the family provided Safeena with a meager but much needed income.

Then one day the young man finally gave up on his pursuit to marry Safeena. He decided instead to take her by force. As

Safeena worked in the house, the man dragged her into a room and raped her. In Muslim nations, a woman who is raped or not a virgin is considered unfit for marriage.

Devastated, Safeena planned to press charges, but before she could contact the police, the family accused her of theft. Still reeling from the rape, Safeena was thrown in jail.

As if her situation could grow no worse, Safeena received a visitor. It was her rapist. When the police gave him access to her, he raped her again. Then a police officer assigned to guard her raped her as well, intensifying her shame.

Stories such as Safeena's are not uncommon in Pakistan. Protestant Christians in the south Asian nation make up only 1 percent of the population. Ninety-seven percent of Pakistan's 135 million inhabitants are Muslims. Believers have faced mob violence, discrimination and harassment. Their testimonies should challenge

Christians in the West to a deeper commitment to serve Christ no matter the cost.

One Muslim imam, or mosque prayer leader, was drawn to Christianity after analyzing Islam and Christianity side by side, comparing the Bible with the Quran. When he finished, he prayed hesitantly for Jesus to reveal Himself if, indeed, He was real. That night, he says, he had a dream in which Jesus held out to him His nail-scarred hands.

"I died for you," Jesus told the man.

When he awoke, the man prayed to receive Christ as his savior. But later, his own mother, a devout Muslim, tried to poison

him. Miraculously, though he ate the food, he was not harmed.

Another Pakistani Christian was threatened by radical Muslims. They held loaded guns to his head and ordered him to deny his faith in Christ and convert to Islam. "I cannot do that," the man answered. "As soon as you pull the trigger, I will be with Jesus. And I'm in a hurry to see Him, so hurry up and pull the trigger!"

Pastor Robinson Abid also is no stranger to persecution. He leads a small band of Christians in the town of Shanti Nagar, a village of almost 20,000 people four miles from Khanewal that is made up mostly of believers. The words "Shanti Nagar" mean "village of peace," but in February 1997 the village was the site of one of the worst attacks on Christians Pakistan has ever seen.

According to Islamic tradition, Feb. 5 is the night the Quran descended from heaven. In Pakistan, radical Muslims spent that night celebrating and chanting slogans. The following day, Feb. 6, 1997, Islamic fervor was at a fever pitch, and an announcement went out from the loudspeakers of the mosques in Khanewal and the surrounding area. Christians, it alleged, had torn a copy of the Quran.

Loyal Muslims were advised to "take up your weapons and take revenge for Allah." Within hours, a mob of more than 70,000 radical Muslims descended on Shanti Nagar, intent on avenging the alleged misdeed. By the day's end, the village of peace was almost destroyed.

The first members of the mob looted the homes and businesses of Christians. The second group burned the village to the

ground, and the third destroyed anything left standing. The mobs chanted as they came: "Kill the Christians, burn their homes! Kill the Christians, burn their homes!"

The believers fled for their lives. One pregnant woman's water broke as she ran, and she and her husband were forced to hide in the bushes to deliver the baby. Another woman, whose husband was a church elder, had delivered a baby only hours before the attack. The elder left his wife and child inside their house and locked the door, then began to run. But the mob lit the house on fire, and the man had to run back to carry his wife and newborn to safety.

It was not yet noon when the mob finished its work. The village was in ruins. As the radical Muslims returned to their homes, the Christians were left to assess the damage. More than 100 people were seriously injured. At least 200 Christian women were abducted and/or raped by the mob, many of them violated by entire gangs of radical Muslim men. The Quran says men shouldn't force themselves sexually on women, but that if they do, Allah is merciful.

Several believers died of heart attacks when they returned to find their homes and businesses in ashes. Children, frightened and traumatized, refused to go to school. The Christians couldn't call the police, for there had been hundreds of police officers leading in the raid.

During the attacks, pastor Abid, whose last name is Arabic for "the one who serves the true God," prayed for the strength not to deny Christ. He, like many of his brothers and sisters in Christ, refused to be bitter toward his persecutors. Instead, the believers held a service to forgive their attackers.

Since the raid the church has grown stronger. Today, Christians in and around Shanti Nagar spend more time in prayer, fasting and Bible reading than ever before. They are more dependent on God now than they were before the attack, Abid says. "If you have no test," he says, "then you have no testimony." Pastor Abid has since been forced out of Pakistan and now lives in the United States.

Safeena's tests have been great, but her testimony is great as well. Today she is free on bail but still faces charges of stealing from her Muslim employer. Her life is forever altered. Because of the shame in Pakistani culture of being raped and of not being a virgin, Safeena faces the prospect of never marrying. Her family may have to relocate to another part of Pakistan for their safety.

Yet despite these challenges, Safeena's faith remains strong. She knows that while her earthly home is dangerous and unstable, her heavenly home is safe and solid. It is on this truth that Safeena and other Pakistani believers stand.

Todd Nettleton is assistant news services director for Voice of the Martyrs in Tulsa, Oklahoma.