

Pakistani Christians Unite in Response to Bloody Attacks

A delegation has appealed to the government of President Pervez Musharraf for protection from Muslim extremists

Because of increased attacks against Christians in Pakistan since 9/11, believers in the Islamic country have joined in a coalition with members of other minorities to appeal for government protection from the escalating climate of brutal religious persecution.

Since 9/11, Pakistani officials have documented 30 deaths and more than 100 injuries that have occurred because of terrorist bombings at Pakistan's Murree Christian School, the Taxila Christian Hospital and several church gatherings.

In a show of widespread sympathy, Pakistanis from across the country observed Black Day on Aug. 15 to remember those killed in the attack on the Taxila hospital near Islamabad, the capital.

Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs joined the bereaved families and hospital staff in a service held at the hospital chapel, where just six days before, four nurses were killed and 29 people injured in an attack by militant Islamics. Elsewhere in the country, people from all religious communities wore black bands and marched in several cities to protest recent terrorist attacks.

Despite the display of solidarity, Christians and other religious minorities in the country are ostracized more often than observed. Pakistan is an Islamic state, and a dim view of

non-Muslims prevails.

Religious minorities, including Christians, are not always well-protected by local police or other government officials from cruelty practiced in the name of Islam. Last summer, three teenagers, who all were minority Christians, were among the victims of violent acts.

Shakeela Siddique, 16, was raped at gunpoint while working for an influential Muslim landlord named Azam. When Siddique's father confronted the landlord for assaulting his daughter, Azam beat him and pushed him out of his house. Instead of seeking justice for the girl and her father, the police are working to conceal the case because Azam is an influential Muslim.

Yagoob Masih, 15, witnessed a bribe while working as a sweeper in a customs department. Afraid that Masih would tell customs officials, the offender lodged a false case against Masih and instigated his arrest.

On the sole testimony of the Muslim offender, local police tortured Masih, breaking his ribs and pulling out his fingernails. Masih fainted and was taken to the hospital where he died. The boy's father protested the police actions, but the police and Muslim extremists are collaborating to keep the case quiet.

Gulnaz Masih, 17, was at work on June 14 when a Muslim male co-worker attempted to fondle her. After Masih slapped him in self-defense, the man promised to take revenge for the slap.

The next day, Masih's alleged attacker took a bottle of

sulfuric acid from his pocket and threw it on Masih's face, breasts, arms and legs. While the girl screamed and called for help, he threw acid in her eyes and mouth.

As a result of the violence, leading representatives from all of Pakistan's religious minorities met in Islamabad on July 14 to unite on one platform to struggle for their rights. The group formed All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA), which legally and financially assists terror or persecution victims. The coalition also stages widely attended press conferences and meetings with government officials to draw attention to the persecution.

President Pervez Musharraf arranged to meet with Shahbaz Bhatti, newly elected APMA chairman, and a five-member minority delegation of coalition members to discuss the persecution against Pakistan's religious minorities. Bhatti mentioned the names of the prisoners who were tortured for allegedly blaspheming Muhammad and presented the recent cases of rape, abduction and forceful conversions of young Christian girls in Pakistan.

Although Musharraf told the APMA delegation that he could not compromise "on the basic Islamic concept of Islamic philosophy for Pakistan," he said he would try to protect the rights of religious minorities. Shortly after the APMA meeting, Musharraf restored special seats reserved for the minorities within the electorate system.

"This is a clear indication that if [minorities] are galvanized and raise their voices from one platform then they can succeed and attain their rights," Bhatti told Charisma. "Now I feel that God is taking us toward our goal, but we still need the prayers of others to stay on the path that

leads to our destiny.”

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