

Taliban Kills Three Foreign Christian Aid Workers in Flood-Ravaged Pakistan

Authorities last week recovered the bodies of three Christian relief workers who had been kidnapped and killed by members of the Pakistani Taliban in the flood-ravaged country, area officials said.

Swat District Coordination Officer Atif-ur-Rehman told Compass that the Pakistan Army recovered the bodies of the three foreign flood-relief workers at about 7 a.m. on Aug. 25. An official at the international humanitarian organization that employed the workers withheld their names and requested that the agency remain unnamed for security reasons. Military sources who withheld news of the deaths from electronic and print media to avoid panicking other relief workers granted permission to Compass to publish it in limited form.

"The foreigner aid workers have been working in Mingora and the surrounding areas," Rehman said. "On Aug. 23 they were returning to their base at around 5:35 p.m. when a group of Taliban attacked their vehicle. They injured around five-six people and kidnapped three foreign humanitarian workers."

Pakistan has been hit by its worst flooding in decades, with the United Nations now estimating more than 21.8 million people have been affected. Foreign aid workers are involved in relief activities across the country, including Swat district in Khyber-Paktunkhwa Province in northern Pakistan. At least 8 million people require emergency relief, with hundreds of thousands reportedly isolated from aid supplies.

An army Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) source said rangers have been deployed in Swat and other potential target areas to help provide security for relief workers.

"The Taliban had warned about attacks on foreigner aid workers and Christian organizations," the ISPR source said. "All the international humanitarian organizations have been notified, and their security has also been increased."

Rehman noted that the Taliban also has been trying to bring relief to flood victims.

"The Taliban are also trying to support the flood victims, and many other banned organizations have set up camps in southern Punjab to support the victims," he said. "They intend to sympathize with the affected and gain their support."

The president of advocacy organization Life for All, Rizwan Paul, said the bodies of the three relief workers had been sent to Islamabad under the supervision of the Pakistan Army.

"We strongly condemn the killing of the three humanitarian workers," Paul said. "These aid workers came to support us, and we are thankful to the humanitarian organizations that came to help us in a time of need."

Pointing to alleged discrimination against minorities in distribution of humanitarian aid, Paul added that Christians in severely flood-damaged areas in Punjab Province have been neglected. The majority of the effected Christians in Punjab are in Narowal, Shakargarh, Muzzafargarh, Rahim Yar Khan and Layyah, he said.

"The Christians living around Maralla, Narowal, and Shakargarh were shifted to the U.N.- administered camps, but they are facing problems in the camps," he said. "There are reports that the Christians are not given tents, clean water and food. In most of the camps the Christians have totally been ignored."

Life for All complained to U.N. agencies and the government of Pakistan regarding the discrimination, but no one has responded yet, he said.

"There have been reports from Muzzaffargarh and Layyah that the Christians are living on the damaged roads in temporary tents, as they were not allowed in the government camps," he said.

In Sindh Province Thatta has been flooded, and around 300 Christian families who tried to move from there to Punjab were forbidden from doing so, a source said. Meteorologists are predicting more rains in coming days, with the already catastrophic flooding expected to get worse.

Kashif Mazhar, vice president of Life for All, said that in the northern province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa conditions for Christians are better as there are Christian camps established, and Garrison Church in Risalpur is also providing aid to victims.

"It is discouraging to see that the Christian organizations are wholeheartedly supporting the victims regardless of the religion or race, but in most of the areas the Christians are totally ignored and not even allowed to stay," Mazhar said.

Foreign targets are rarely attacked directly in Pakistan, despite chronic insecurity in the nuclear-armed state, which is a key ally in the war on Al Qaeda and the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan. On March 10, however, suspected Islamic militants armed with guns and grenades stormed the offices of a Christian relief and development organization in northwest Pakistan, killing six aid workers and wounding seven others.

The gunmen besieged the offices of international humanitarian organization World Vision near Oghi, in Mansehra district, of the North West Frontier Province. Suicide and bomb attacks across Pakistan have killed more than 3,000 people since 2007. Blame has fallen on Taliban and Al Qaeda-linked militants bitterly opposed to the alliance with the United States.

The U.N. decided last year to relocate a limited number of its

international staff from Pakistan because of security concerns. Its World Food Program office in Islamabad was attacked in October last year, with five aid workers killed in a suicide bombing.

Then on Feb. 3, a bomb attack in the NWFP district of Lower Dir killed three U.S. soldiers and five other people at the opening of a school just rebuilt with Western funding after an Islamist attack.