

Al-Qaida-Tied Groups Suspected of Anti-Christian Attacks in Pakistan

☒ Mob violence that killed at least eight Christians in Pakistan on Saturday is being linked to Islamic extremists from groups tied to al-Qaida and the Taliban.

A senior government official told Reuters news service on Tuesday that Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), an outlawed pro-Taliban Sunni Muslim group, and its al-Qaida-linked offshoot, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), were believed to be behind the weekend riot in Gorja, located in the central province of Punjab.

The attackers reportedly set more than 50 houses and a church on fire following an unsubstantiated accusation that a Christian had desecrated the Quran. Women and children were among the dead, which local Christians estimate to number as high as 14, according to Compass Direct News.

Rana Sanaullah, Punjab's law minister, told Reuters that "masked men" came from the nearby district of Jhang, where both the SSP and LeJ were founded, to incite the rioting in Gojra.

"Absolutely, these banned groups are involved in the rioting," Sanaullah said.

The rioting follows an intelligence report Sanaullah said the government received two months ago suggesting that Islamic militants were switching from suicide bombings to inciting sectarian strife to destabilize the country.

Roughly 150 people have been detained for questioning, according to Reuters.

The mob violence came just days after a similar rumor that Christians desecrated the Quran prompted Islamic extremists to set fire to the village of Korian, located seven miles from Gojra. Roughly 60 houses were gutted during the attack last Thursday, Compass Direct reported.

(Read "Christians Burned to Death in Islamist Attacks in Pakistan.")

Sanallah reportedly said an initial investigation into allegations that Christians blasphemed the Quran indicated no incident of desecration.

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