

Bogus 'Blasphemy' Charge Sends Pakistani Families Fleeing

✖ At least 10 Christian families in a village in Pakistan's Punjab Province have fled their homes after a throng of area Muslims accused a Christian of blaspheming Islam on Friday.

Yousaf Masih of village No. 68 AR Farmwala, in Khanewal district's Mian Channu area, told Compass that his brother Yaqub's grandson, 8-year-old Ihtesham (also known as Sunny), had gone out to fetch ice when Muslim boys from a nearby religious school started harassing him.

"The Muslim boys asked Sunny to recite the *Kalma Tayyaba*, Islam's foremost proclamation of Muhammad as prophet, and become a Muslim, and only then would he be allowed to go home," Masih said. "Sunny refused to repeat the Arabic verse, which infuriated the Muslim boys, and they started beating him up."

Masih said that his son Dildar Masih, a 26-year-old father of two boys ages 3 and 2, was going to his work as a painter when he saw the Muslim boys thrashing his nephew.

"Dildar rushed towards them and rescued Sunny from their attack," Yousaf Masih said. "Sunny told him that the boys were beating him because he would not recite their *Kalma*, at which Dildar rebuked the boys for forcing Sunny to renounce his religion. He then asked Sunny to return home and left for his workplace."

He added that a vegetable vendor named Falak Sher was also present and witnessed the incident.

Yousaf Masih said that he was later walking home when about 60 Muslims led by Qari Hasnain, a village prayer leader, stopped him.

"I later came to know that they were coming from my house," Yousaf Masih said. "They told me that Dildar had blasphemed Islam by abusing the Kalma. Hasnain claimed that he himself had heard my son abusing the Islamic holy words as he was standing in the entrance of his mosque, located near the site of the incident."

Yousaf Masih immediately begged forgiveness from them on behalf of his son, he said, and assured them that he would punish Dildar Masih if their allegations were true.

"But Qari Hasnain refused to accept the apology," he said. "He said that if they start forgiving everyone for blasphemy, then it would become a routine for all to ridicule Islam. This further instigated the Muslims, and they said they would punish Dildar themselves."

One of the Muslims asked the others to forgive them as Yousaf Masih had apologized for his son, "but they weren't ready to listen," he added.

"I knew my son's life was in great danger, but I still assured them that we would bring him before them so that he could explain the situation," Yousaf Masih said.

He went home, and soon at least 500 Muslims "besieged" his house, demanding that he hand his son over to them.

"It was later in the evening that we came to know that Qari Hasnain had telephoned the clerics of the neighboring villages, and they had made announcements calling on all Muslims to come out for the defense of Islam' after the Friday prayer," he said.

Yousaf Masih said he never imagined the Muslims would resort

to such tactics.

"The Muslims were shouting slogans like "'Death to the blasphemer,' and, 'Christians must pay for ridiculing Islam,'" he said. "My brother Yaqub, his son Ayub and I came out of our house and tried to calm the violent mob, but they started shoving and cursing us "¡ they also manhandled my wife Iqbal when she came out of the house."

His son, still working, had no clue what was going on back home. Yousaf Masih said the Muslims told him to bring his son to the property of Rana Tayyab, a local politician, in the evening, and "we had to say yes to them."

Before they could meet, however, the village's mosque loudspeakers began blaring again, urging "all the faithful to find the blasphemer and punish him," he said.

Yousaf Masih said his son Dildar did not know about the declarations emanating from the mosque and was caught unaware when the Islamic throng arrived at the house he was painting.

"They pounced on him like tigers," his elderly father said. "They slapped him, kicked him, and my poor son didn't even know why he was being tortured."

During the commotion, a Pashtun villager named Noori, who knew the Christian family, arrived by motorcycle and somehow managed to rescue Dildar Masih from the mob.

"Noori took Dildar to his home, but the mob followed him, most of them armed with weapons," Yousaf Masih said. "They surrounded Noori's house and demanded he hand over the Christian to them so that they could kill him."

Noori called the police to save Dildar Masih's life, and a patrol car arrived.

"The police took Dildar to the Talumba police station, but within half an hour a crowd of about 2,500 Muslims gathered

outside the building and demanded the police hand over Dildar to them,” Yousaf Masih said. “The police personnel present in the building knew the mob would go to any lengths to get their hands on Dildar, which is why they tricked the crowd by sending out a decoy vehicle to show that he was being sent to the city.”

Hasnain led clerics in spreading the word that Dildar Masih was at the police station, and more Muslims arrived. They blocked the main road and began protesting to pressure police into handing Dildar Masih over.

“Public announcements were made to kill Dildar,” Yousaf Masih said, adding that he and other members of his family were about to head to the police station when some villagers advised them not to go. “They told us that Qari Hasnain had poisoned the minds of the people to such an extent that they would not hesitate to kill us also.”

Police registered a blasphemy case against Dildar Masih, No. 211/11 under Section 298 of the Pakistan Penal Code and Section 16 of the Maintenance of Public Order, late Friday night (June 10).

Fleeing

The next day the clerics again stirred up the masses, urging Muslims through the loudspeakers of area mosques to “take revenge.”

Yousaf Masih said that Tayyab, the village leader, tried to calm the throng, asking them to control their emotions “since the main culprit had been arrested,” but they paid no heed.

“We panicked after hearing the announcements,” Yousaf Masih said. “Of the 10 Christian families living in the area, seven of us are related. We decided to immediately leave our homes, fearing for the honor and lives of our women and children.”

The families locked their homes and left with whatever little

money they had on them, he said.

“I had a cow, a donkey and two goats, but I could only take my donkey with me,” he said. Tears flooding his eyes, he added, “I cut loose my cow and goats, because I didn’t know when we would be able to return home. The poor animals would have died of starvation otherwise.”

In all, the Christian families left behind at least 25 animals, including some cattle””which they fear may not be there when they return.

Yousaf Masih and his nephew Ayub arrived in Lahore on Monday seeking legal assistance for Dildar Masih. At the office of the Community Development Initiative (CDI), an affiliate of the European Centre for Law and Justice, they told Compass that the 10 families had sought refuge with relatives.

“We are poor, but God has been kind to us, and we have been meeting our ends by working hard,” said Ayub, father of the 8-year-old boy whose beating triggered the incident. “But since Dildar’s arrest, everything has changed “; all our possessions are in our homes, but we cannot go back there.”

The incident has so frightened the families that they were contemplating settling in some other village even if tensions calm in Farmwala.

Asif Aqeel of CDI said his organization will find a lawyer for Dildar Masih. He said that efforts would also be made to negotiate a safe return of the Christian families to their village after taking local Muslim elders into confidence.

“This may not happen overnight, but we are hoping that the Muslims will shift their focus from the other Christian families as the days pass,” he said.

Repeated attempts to calls the Talumba police station house officer to inquire about the safety of Dildar Masih went

unanswered. A police official of the same station who requested anonymity, however, told Compass that police were exercising maximum caution.

“The situation is very volatile here,” he said. “It’s difficult to handle people’s sentiments in cases such as this one.”

Regarding Dildar Masih’s whereabouts, he only said, “the suspect is at a safe place.”