

Christian Pastor Arrested for Blasphemy After Pakistani Mob Forces Hundreds to Flee Over Facebook Post

Violence over a Christian Facebook post forced hundreds of Pakistani Christians to flee the neighborhood of Charrar, Lahore, fearing retribution and the destruction of their homes. Pastor Raja Waris, who shared the post, was arrested and taken into custody after violent mobs threatened arson to the Christian community.

This incident is a symptom of a long history of violence that has taken place against Christians and other minorities in Pakistan. The United States Department of State has listed Pakistan as a country of particular concern for persecution of religious minorities.

Pakistani Christians are frequently falsely accused of blasphemy against Islam and sentenced to 10 years for hurting religious feelings, life imprisonment for desecrating the Quran or a mandatory death penalty for defiling the name of the Prophet Muhammad.

People who are tried under these laws are rarely granted bail. While no one has officially been executed under Pakistan's blasphemy laws, rioting mobs often gather and threaten to kill the alleged blasphemer. Several of such mobs have destroyed and set on fire entire Christian neighborhoods and have killed many.

Furthermore, more than 1,500 people have been charged under the blasphemy laws from 1987 to 2017, many of them Christian, and at least 75 people have been killed.

The State Department reports that many individuals accused of blasphemy in Pakistan remain in solitary confinement for extended periods and are often subjected to poor prison conditions. Data indicates that religious minorities, especially Christians, are disproportionately affected and targeted by the blasphemy laws.

According to findings of the American Center for Law and Justice in the most recent case, Pastor Raja Waris shared a post on Facebook around Dec. 22 that some Muslims characterized as blasphemous. The exact content of the post is unknown, as the post was removed after receiving violent threats.

Even after Waris apologized and removed the post, he and his family had to go into hiding to flee more violent threats against their lives. Hundreds of Muslims continued to demand Waris' beheading. When the mobs grew even more violent and threatened arson, the Christians fled the neighborhood and sought shelter.

Police were deployed, and they took Pastor Waris into custody. ACLJ has been told the police have filed a blasphemy case against him, with negotiations between Muslim, Christian and government leaders ongoing. There is hope that the government will do the right thing, resolving the matter and dismissing any charges against the pastor.

According to ACLJ affiliate, European Centre for Law and Justice's office in Pakistan, the Organization for Legal Aid was able to resolve a similar matter through negotiations. In that case, a pastor who had given a sermon at a funeral regarding Christ's death was taken as blasphemous by a Muslim who was attending the funeral.

After charges were filed, OLA representatives approached the aggrieved Muslim and some community leaders and helped explain the meaning of the pastor's sermon. In response, the Muslim

complainant went to the court and testified that he did indeed misunderstand the sermon and had no grievance against the pastor. The court dismissed the charges after it heard that statement, and we filed a petition for dismissal for lack of evidence.

In Charrar, many of those who fled their homes in the initial violence have returned, but the situation remains volatile.

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