

Christians Flee Pakistani Village After Pastor Accused of Blasphemy

Dozens of Christian families have fled from their homes in a village near Lahore in Pakistan after a pastor was accused of blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad.

In a discussion with a Muslim man on Aug. 24, pastor Sattar Masih, 37, was accused of saying Muhammad was a brutal man who killed innocent people.

Masih denies the accusations, saying he said nothing derogatory about Islam or the prophet.

The pastor was beckoned before Islamic clerics to plead his case.

"The clerics will decide if he blasphemed against our prophet and in case he refused to appear before the clerics, then we will kill him," says his accuser, 18-year-old Ali Hassan.

Fearing he would not be given a fair trial, Masih fled to Lahore with 21-year-old Christian Wasim Raza, who had introduced Hassan to the pastor, after a group of Muslims had undertaken a house-to-house search for them.

Masih told World Watch Monitor that one cleric asked him if he had said Muhammad was a cruel man.

"I clearly refuted the claim and told him that I had only defended that the Bible is still in its original form," he said.

On Sept. 2, more than 250 Muslims gathered to discuss the case against Masih. Seven Christians from Masih's and Raza's families defended him, saying no insulting language about

Islam or its prophet had been used.

The next day, teachers from the village school asked Christian students about the religious teachings Masih had been giving them. More than 100 of them were sent home, which raised alarms among their families, causing many of them to flee from the village.

A local police spokesman says police have intervened and that there is no danger of an attack against Christians. However, Christians are still reluctant to return, particularly Masih and Raza, who fear they will be killed.

There is a history of violence in Pakistan against those accused of blasphemy. In 2012, a Hindu teenager was brutally killed and burned. Last year, a Muslim man was taken out of the police station where he had been questioned and was burned to death.

In July 2010, two Christian brothers, Sajid Emmanuel and Rashid Emmanuel, were shot death at the courthouse where they had been declared innocent.

Pakistan is No. 14 on the 2013 World Watch List, an annual ranking of the 50 countries where life as a Christian is most difficult. It is published by Open Doors International, a ministry to Christians living under pressure for their faith. Pakistan's Christians are "caught between Islamic militant organizations, an Islamizing culture and a weak government with a military complicit in fuelling Islamic militants," according to the list.