

Christians Murdered for 'Desecrating Quran,' Police Conclude

A married Christian couple was beaten and their bodies burned on Tuesday by an angry mob in Pakistan's Punjab province for allegedly desecrating a copy of the Quran.

The incident took place in the town in Kot Radha Kishan, about 60 kilometers southwest of Lahore, and is the latest example of mob violence against minorities accused of blasphemy, according to a report in the *Times of India*.

The victims, identified only by their first names—Shama and Shehzad—were burned in a brick kiln where they work with the others.

"A mob attacked a Christian couple after accusing them of desecration of the Holy Quran and later burnt their bodies in a brick kiln," a news agency quoted senior police official Bin-Yameen as saying.

Pakistan's brick kiln workers are often subject to harsh practices, with a study by the Bonded Labor Liberation Front Pakistan estimating that 4.5 million are indentured laborers.

Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif has constituted a three-member committee to fast-track the investigation of the killings and ordered police to beef up security at Christian neighborhoods in the province, an official from his media office told the Agence France-Presse news agency.

Blasphemy is a hugely sensitive issue in the majority Muslim country, with even unproven allegations often prompting mob violence. Blasphemy and the draconian laws dealing with it are highly sensitive issues in Pakistan; even the courts and

legislators think twice before delving into the sensitivities of these issues.

Anyone convicted, or even just accused, of insulting Islam risks a violent and bloody death at the hands of vigilantes.

The controversial blasphemy laws were formulated in the 1980s during the martial law regime of General Zia-ul-Haq. A conviction, or merely an accusation, of blasphemy can put one's life in danger. Even if one is acquitted, the fear of death at the hands of vigilantes remains.

A Christian woman, Aasia Bibi, has been on death row since November 2010 after she was found guilty of making blasphemous remarks about Prophet Muhammad during a quarrel with a Muslim woman.

Two prominent politicians who were campaigning for the release of Aasia Bibi and reform of the law were ruthlessly murdered in Pakistan's capital. Ex Punjab governor, Salmaan Taseer, was shot dead in January 2011 by his own bodyguard while the then federal minister for minority affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, was killed in March 2011.