

Muslims Wipe Out Pakistani Colony to Avenge Christian 'Blasphemy'

More than 100 Christian homes were torched on Saturday by an enraged Muslim mob, following reports that a Christian man had blasphemed Islam in Lahore, eastern Pakistan. Thousands of Christians demonstrated throughout the country the next day, demanding justice and criticizing the police for failing to protect them.

A mob of some 3,000 Muslims set fire to approximately 178 Christian homes and two churches in the Joseph Colony of Lahore on Saturday, following accusations that Sawan Masih, a Christian sanitation worker, had made derogatory remarks about the Muslim Prophet Muhammad. Masih had allegedly made the blasphemous comments on Wednesday during a dispute on religious issues with Shahid Imran, a Muslim, while the men "were drunk," said local resident Altaf Masih.

The violence began after Friday prayers when about 100 Muslims pelted Masih's house with stones and beat his elderly father, according to International Christian Concern sources. After the mob had gathered, Masih was taken into police custody and charged with blasphemy under Section 295-C of Pakistan's Penal Code.

Hundreds of **Christians** fled the area later that night in fear for their safety. On Saturday, thousands of Muslims returned to the area and attacked Christian-owned houses, shops and two churches. No Christians were reportedly injured, but their possessions were stolen or destroyed during the raid.

"[Christians] don't want to return to their burnt houses as they are petrified," Gulzar Bibi, a local Christian resident, told *The Express Tribune*. "I have nothing left to me

apart from these clothes. Nothing is left behind in these charred houses for me.”

Thousands of Christians in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad protested the violence on Sunday, accusing the police of failing to protect the Christians of Joseph Colony while also condemning the country’s blasphemy laws. Though the Pakistani government claims it instituted **blasphemy laws** to seek religious harmony through uniformity, in practice, blasphemy laws provide cover for personal vendettas against religious minorities.

Approximately 1,400 blasphemy cases have been registered since the law was first enacted in 1986, according to Human Rights Watch. There are at least 16 people currently on death row, including several Christians, in Pakistan for blasphemy, and 20 serving life sentences. If convicted, Masih could be given the death sentence.

“Not a month goes by in Pakistan without Christians being attacked, arrested or threatened and forced to flee their homes because of accusations of blasphemy,” Aidan Clay, ICC regional manager for the Middle East, said. “Now, an entire colony in Lahore has been emptied of Christians because local Muslims felt justified by law to avenge one Christian’s ‘blasphemous’ remarks by punishing the entire **Christian community**. The ordeal once again proves that blasphemy laws are fundamentally flawed.

“Rather than protecting Pakistani citizens, as the law should, blasphemy laws provide cover and embolden extremists to commit violent acts against innocent minorities,” he continued. “As long as such laws exist, the country will continue to be plagued by abuse in the name of religion and Christians and other religious minorities will continue to suffer.

“ICC calls on the Pakistani government to arrest those responsible for the attack, rebuild the Christians’ homes and

shops, and replace all their possessions, including their life's savings, which many families lost in the raid. No one should be attacked by mobs and disdained by their government simply because they are a member of a minority religious community."

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