

Pakistan Police Torture Sister of Christian Who Eloped

✖ Sheikhpura police this month tortured a young Christian woman into revealing the whereabouts of the legal team helping her family after an influential Muslim family kidnapped her and her sister, sources said.

Police also helped the Muslim family beat relatives of the Christian woman on court premises and attacked the offices of the organization trying to help her family, they said.

The Community Development Initiative (CDI) was providing legal assistance to the family of Sajid Ashraf Masih, whose elopement with a young woman from the Gujjar family in Sheikhpura last month led the influential Muslims to kidnap Masih's sisters, said Asif Aqeel, executive director of CDI. Gujjar family members kidnapped Rakhel Ashraf, in her early 20s, on May 13; they released her on May 17 but forcibly took her 17-year-old sister Maryam Ashraf that day.

CDI, an affiliate of the European Centre for Law and Justice, helped the family negotiate the release of the two Christian sisters and also made efforts for the return of the runaway couple in order to avert religious conflict in Ghazi Minara village, outside Sheikhpura in Punjab Province. Aqeel and others feared inter-religious tensions would put the lives of some 70 Christian families of the area in jeopardy.

He said the Gujjars had filed a case with Sheikhpura police of abduction of their daughter, Saleha, naming Rakhel Ashraf and three others, as a pressure tactic for the recovery of Saleha. Aqeel said none of those named in the case knew the whereabouts of the couple.

“CDI does not support any Christian who elopes with a Muslim girl at the cost of communal strife, but in this case we were only representing Rakhel and her cousin Inderyas Masih, who had been falsely implicated by the Gujjars,” said Aqeel.

He said CDI managed to find the eloped couple, who had contracted a marriage by then, and convinced them to return to Lahore in order to help resolve the inter-religious tensions.

“The Gujjars are a very influential family of the area, and they had been threatening a repeat of the Gojra carnage if their girl was not returned to them,” Aqeel said. “This was a serious situation for the Christian family and the other Christians of the area.”

At least seven Christians were burned alive by Muslim mobs in Gojra after the spread of a rumor of blaspheming Islam on Aug. 1, 2009.

Aqeel added that Saleha’s written statement before a judge of the Lahore District Court was critical in the acquittal of Rakhel Ashraf and Inderyas Masih.

“It was important that she make a statement before the court that she had eloped with Rakhel’s brother Sajid and was not abducted as alleged in the Gujjars’ First Information Report,” he said.

Violence

Aqeel said CDI had petitioned the Sheikhpura court for temporary pre-arrest bail for Rakhel on May 24, and the court had fixed a hearing on June 1 to make it permanent.

“On the day of the hearing, the CDI staff took Rakhel to Sheikhpura, but we didn’t know that the Gujjars had planned to prevent her from appearing in the court,” he said, adding that a relative of Rakhel, William Masih, fearful of what the Gujjars would do, made several calls to CDI Field Officer Napoleon Qayyum asking him to keep her from appearing before

the judge.

“We suspected that something was not right, but getting her bail confirmed was very important,” Aqeel said. “On reaching the courts, the CDI team informed William that she had reached there. The team did not know that the Gujjars were holding William’s father-in-law, Hadayat Masih, who is Rakhel’s maternal uncle, hostage on the court premises.”

The Gujjars had told William Masih they would release Hadayat Masih only if he handed over Rakhel to them, Aqeel said. After receiving word from the CDI team, William Masih told the Gujjars that Rakhel had arrived.

“Hearing this, the men started beating him, Hadayat and another Christian accompanying him,” Aqeel said. “They were helped by local lawyers and police personnel, and the CDI team narrowly escaped the attack.”

Although Rakhel Ashraf had obtained temporary pre-arrest bail – the judge was on leave that day, June 1, when it was to be made permanent – police then took her into custody and tortured her into revealing the location of the CDI office in Lahore, about 70 kilometers from Sheikhpura, he said.

Aqeel said that the same evening, sources informed CDI officials that the Gujjars were coming to Lahore to attack their office.

“As soon as we got the information, we vacated the building to avoid any harm to our staff,” he said. “However, we didn’t know that a heavy police contingent was also accompanying them. I rushed home, fearing that the Gujjars might want to harm my family, and quickly took them to my in-laws’ house.”

The raiding party caused some damage to the office, he said.

Aqeel said that after finding no one there, the police raided the house of CDI’s Qayyum in Youhanabad.

"We were already anticipating this move and had moved Qayyum's family to a safer place before the raid," he said, adding that neighbors told them later that the police had scaled the walls of the house and broken two doors in the process.

Qayyum told Compass that police raided his house again the next day (June 2).

"They forced my brother, Naveed Alam, to come outside and started humiliating him in an effort to trace my whereabouts," Qayyum said. "But this incident has not put fear in my heart, and I will continue to serve my community in all ways possible."

Aqeel said that he told his staff members not to go to the office for several days.

"I feared that if any one of us was captured by the Gujjars, they would torture us into revealing the whereabouts of the couple, and this might put their lives in extreme danger," he said.

On June 3, Aqeel said, CDI lawyers managed to negotiate the safe return of Saleha to her family on the condition that they would stop harassing the Christians and also withdraw all cases registered against them.

"Rakhel's family says they are not being threatened now," Aqeel said. "No legal development has taken place, and the situation seems to have settled down by the grace of God."

Rakhel's brother, Abid Masih, confirmed that the family's ordeal seemed to have ended, as Saleha had been returned to her family – though her husband is still in hiding, and a divorce process is underway.

"The Gujjars have promised to withdraw all cases against us and also assured that they won't harm any of our family

members," Abid Masih said.

A local clergyman identified only as Father Emanuel heaved a sigh of relief.

"All glory be to God, as a major situation has been averted," he said. "I was fearing much violence, because such issues are a matter of honor for the Muslims, and in this case the boy happened to be a Christian."