

Pakistani Christian Accused of Blasphemy for Misspelling

An eighth-grade student in Pakistan has been expelled from school and her family forced to relocate after the Christian girl misspelled an Urdu word, leading to accusations of “blasphemy,” sources said.

In the garrison city of Abbottabad, 13-year-old Faryal Bhatti, a student at the Sir Syed Girls High School in Pakistan Ordnance Factories Colony Havelian, misspelled a word on an Urdu exam on Sept. 22 while answering a question on a poem in praise of the Muslim prophet Muhammad, according to area Christians.

Faryal wrote *laanat*, the transliteration of the Urdu word for “curse,” instead of *naat*, which means a poem written in praise of Islam’s prophet, they said. The school administration and local Islamists declared that the error was serious enough to violate Pakistan’s widely condemned laws against blaspheming Muhammad and Islam.

Conviction under Section 295-C of Pakistan’s blasphemy law for derogatory comments about Muhammad is punishable by death, though life imprisonment is also possible.

Faryal’s Urdu teacher was collecting the answer sheets from her students when she noticed the word on Faryal’s paper. The teacher, identified only as Fareeda, summoned the Christian girl, scolded her and beat her, area sources told Compass by telephone.

Fareeda then notified the principal, who in turn informed school officials as news of the error spread throughout the colony. The next day, male students at the school as well as some Muslim representatives staged a demonstration, demanding registration of a criminal case against the eighth-grader and

her eviction from the area, sources said.

Prayer leaders within the Muslim community also condemned the incident in their Friday sermons, asking the colony's administration to take action against Faryal as well as her family, sources said.

POF Colony Havelian Managing Director Asif Siddiki called a meeting of clerics and school teachers to discuss the conflict, according to reports, at which the girl and her mother were ordered to appear; they explained that it was a mere error caused by a resemblance between the two words.

The girl and her mother immediately apologized, contending that Faryal had no malicious intentions, but in a move apparently designed to pacify Muslim cries for punishment, the POF administration expelled her from the school on Saturday (Sept. 24).

School administrator Junaid Sarfraz said Faryal had confessed that she had inadvertently made the mistake and the school administration, after consulting local clerics, decided to expel her. Sarfraz claimed that Faryal's teacher was certain that she had made the mistake intentionally and that the matter was referred to clerics because Faryal had previously aroused similar suspicions of blasphemy.

Maulana Alla Dita, head of the area's prominent mosque, reportedly said the school administration had made the right decision in expelling Faryal from school. Dita claimed that he had met with Faryal, who had apologized for the mistaken use of the word. Dita said he wasn't clear about Faryal's intentions, but that "the word she had used was sacrilegious," according to press reports.

Faryal's mother, Sarafeen Bhatti, a staff nurse at the POF Hospital Havelian for several years, was immediately transferred to POF Wah Cantonment Hospital. Abbottabad District Commissioner Syed Imtiaz Hussain Shah said the 13-

year-old had been expelled for using “derogatory words” and her mother had consequently been “moved to another place.”

A Christian lawyer in Havelian who was among the community members making efforts to defuse area tensions told Compass by phone that the military had acted swiftly to save the lives of Faryal and her mother.

“The military swung into action soon after protests broke out calling for a blasphemy case against the teenager,” said the attorney on condition of anonymity. “They bundled the family in an ambulance and took them away before the situation could turn violent.”

A text-message campaign also started on Sept. 24 calling for action against the family, he said.

“Some Christian families living in the area panicked, but the situation has been under control so far,” he said.

An area Christian told Compass there were 13 or 14 Christian families in the colony who now have fears about security. He said that Faryal’s family had little contact with other Christians living in the area. The resident also praised the army for acting timely, “or else the mullahs would have punished all of us for the little girl’s error.”

The incident has instilled fear in Christian parents that an unintentional mistake by their children could cause them personal disaster. Shazia Imran, mother to three schoolchildren, told Compass that Faryal’s episode had left her distressed.

“Ever since I came to know about the young girl’s story, I have been unable to sleep properly,” she said. “We have been continuously telling our children not to discuss their faith with anyone in school and to avoid getting into religious discussions with their Muslim class fellows, but this was beyond my imagination.”

She added that she and her husband were now “very disturbed and fearful” about their children’s future in Pakistan.

Azra George, a Christian mother to a college student, said the incident had shocked her and the congregation at her Presbyterian church.

“Everyone at church was discussing this sorry incident on Sunday,” she said. “Parents of school-going children were particularly perturbed. This blasphemy thing will always remain hanging on our heads like a sword, and there’s nothing anyone can do about it.”

Compass’s repeated attempts to reach the Bhatti family were unsuccessful as they had moved to an undisclosed location due to security concerns.

Asif Aqeel, executive director of the Community Development Initiative, an affiliate of the European Centre for Law and Justice, said the incident showed how Pakistani society was getting sensitized over the issue of blasphemy.

“Only a small number of people are formally accused of blasphemy – we do not know the number of people who, like Faryal and her family, are harassed without a legal charge,” he said. “Members of Pakistan’s minority communities are afraid of moving around and expressing themselves freely due to the fear of being accused of blasphemy.”

Christians make up only percent of Pakistan’s population, which is more than 95 percent Muslim, according to *Operation World*. Section 295-B of Pakistan’s blasphemy law makes willful desecration of the Quran or use of an extract in a derogatory manner punishable with life imprisonment. Section 295-A prohibits injuring or defiling places of worship and “acts intended to outrage religious feelings.” It is punishable by life imprisonment, which in Pakistan is 25 years.

Aqeel said a Christian boy was recently implicated in a

criminal case of harassment by the family of a Muslim girl who was in love with him. Aqeel said the boy's family urged the police investigating officer to free the boy, whose name was withheld for security reasons, as the charges were baseless.

"The family was taken aback when the police official told them that their son had mocked the Sunnah [sayings and teachings] of prophet Muhammad by keeping a French beard," Aqeel said. Thus, although the harassment case had nothing to do with the blasphemy law, the mere mention of the law forced the family to keep silent, he said.

Similarly, Christian teachers avoid lessons that mention Islamic history or anything related to the religion out of fear that any misstep could bring criminal charges. Likewise, Urdu language and social studies textbooks include several lessons on Islamic religious thought, so Christian teachers avoid nearly half of these books to avoid being charged with blasphemy, he said.

Napolean Qayyum, a leader of the Minorities Wing of the ruling Pakistan People's Party, condemned the incident, saying it was unfortunate that a 13-year-old had to suffer this ordeal over a miniscule error.

"The army's timely intervention saved the Christians' lives, but most people are not so fortunate," he said, adding that the incident showed how intolerance towards minorities was taking root in Pakistani society.

"Would the teacher have highlighted the same mistake if it was made by a Muslim student?" he said. "I would guess not."