

Pakistani Christian Killed by Muslim Employer, Relatives Say

The Christian family of 24-year-old Imran Masih in Pakistan's Punjab Province was in anguish. The previous week, on Feb. 7, Masih was found dead at his Muslim employer's farmhouse.

The employer, influential landowner Chaudhry Maqsood Cheema, claimed that Masih committed suicide by hanging himself. Masih's relatives believe that Cheema, seeing the young Christian man as a "soft target" whose family had little standing or legal recourse in the predominantly Muslim society, killed him for taking a day off without informing him.

Masih had married eight months ago, and the couple was expecting their first child, his father Lal Masih told Compass by telephone from Nath Kallan village in Esa Nagar, Gujranwala district. He said Cheema had hired his son to care for his livestock a month ago, and that a few days before his death, Imran Masih had taken a day off from work without informing Cheema.

"Cheema did not approve of this action and reprimanded him severely," he said.

Imran Masih went to work the morning of Feb. 7 as usual, said Lal Masih, who was also employed by Cheema as his tractor driver. Shortly thereafter, Cheema's brother called him and said his son had committed suicide by hanging himself, he said. The family rushed towards Cheema's farmhouse, where they were told that Masih had hung himself in a cattle stall.

"When I entered the room, I saw my son's body hanging with a rope, and a very loose noose was around his neck," Lal Masih

said. The body hung only about six inches off the ground, he said, and there was nothing nearby that could have served as a mount from which to fall in an attempt to hang himself.

Gakhar Mandi station police soon arrived.

"The police asked me if I wanted to pursue any legal action against anyone, but I wasn't in the right frame of mind to make a decision—my senses had gone numb as the body of my son lay before me," he said.

Police asked him to sign some papers, and Lal Masih said he still does not know their content. The family took the body by tractor to the Tehsil Headquarters Hospital in Wazirabad for an autopsy.

"When we reached the hospital, we saw that Cheema, his brother Munir Ahmed and some other Muslims were already present there," he said. "The doctors carried out the autopsy, but the report was not handed over to us."

Lal Masih said his son's sudden death shocked the village, as no one saw any reason that he would want to commit suicide.

"I am sure he did not have any reason to kill himself," he said. "He was leading a happy life. There was no reason at all."

Family members tried to register a report, but police refused to accept their complaint.

"The police said that since I had refused to initiate legal proceedings at first, they were not going to register a case," Lal Masih said. "They refused to understand that I could barely think when they were asking me this question."

In protest of the police's refusal to register a case, Christian villagers decided to block the main road. After the Christians staged a two-hour sit-in, police registered a murder case against Cheema, his brother Munir, Rashid Ahmad

and another Muslim identified only as Mohsin.

Napolean Qayyum, field officer for Christian legal aid organization Community Development Initiative (CDI), said his team accompanied the family to the hospital on Feb. 10 and faced resistance when they asked for the autopsy report. Only after persistent efforts and an appeal to an outside agency were they able to obtain the autopsy report, he said.

Qayyum said he suspected deliberate skewing of the report, which stated Masih died by hanging. The CDI team discovered that Cheema's cousin, Dr. Muhammad Asif, had been present at the autopsy and might have influenced the report.

"Lal told us that the men who had washed Masih's dead body had reported seeing a swelling of his private organs, which suggested that he had been hit badly in that area," Qayyum said. "There was also a bruise on the back of his head."

He said the CDI team would consider exhuming Masih's body if necessary. The CDI team has yet to meet the investigating officer of the case, Sub-Inspector Muhammad Adnan, he said, but according to Lal Masih, Adnan would side with Cheema because they belong to the same caste.

Sub-Inspector Adnan told Compass by phone that he and Station House Officer Iqbal Cheema had inspected the crime scene twice to ascertain whether Masih had committed suicide or was murdered. He said police would arrest the named suspects if it establishes that the cause of death warrants it.