

# Pakistani Christians Ensure Police Arrest Key Murder Suspect

Hundreds of Pakistani Christians braved scorching summer heat for three days and two nights in agricultural fields to ensure that police would register the alleged murder of a Punjabi agricultural smallholder in front of his two children.

Ishaq Masih, 45, a resident of a village in the Okara district, near Lahore, was shot dead on July 27, his children say, by a man named Muhammad Luqman (alias Ranjha) who, accompanied by others, had illegally occupied Masih's land.

Fearing the police would not follow due process, as a minority Christian was involved, local Christians rushed to the scene. They then refused to bury the body for three days (contrary to Pakistani practice of burial the next day) until police had agreed to register the murder, arrest two of the suspects and conduct an autopsy.

On July 29, police promised they would arrest all other suspects (including Ranjha) within a week, but only if the Christians would bury Masih and then disperse peacefully. The protesters agreed, and Catholic Fr. James Bahadur buried Masih that night.

Police, however, failed to arrest prime suspect Ranjha by their self-imposed deadline of Aug. 5, the outcome Bahadur and others had feared. (Meanwhile, seven suspected accomplices were released on bail.)

According to Masih's children, events leading up to his death went as follows.

On the morning of July 27, Masih learned Ranjha had illegally

occupied one acre of his agricultural land and was sowing sweet corn seeds. Masih went with his 12-year-old daughter, Saima, and 15-year-old son, Irshad, to see for himself.

Saima told World Watch Monitor, "As we reached [the field], suddenly about eight men on motorbikes encircled us."

Irshad added, "About four men started beating my father and dragged him around. They threw him on the ground, and then Ranjha fired a shot at my father, which hit the right side of his chest."

The teenage boy said that as soon as his father had been shot, about four of the assailants led him to a nearby farmhouse.

"They beat me and pressured me to confess to the police that I killed my father, or else they would kill me," Irshad said.

Only 12-year-old Saima was left with her father gasping in agony.

"We were carrying some food and water. When my father asked for water in his pain, I hurried to give it to him, but Ranjha slapped me and slopped the water on the ground," she said.

While Masih was dying, Saima said one of his assailants called the emergency services and urged them to attend. She said he told them Irshad had killed his father in a family fight, after which the men had held the boy.

People had already gathered by the time the police arrived. Onlookers told the police that Ranjha had taken Irshad hostage after Ranjha shot Masih. The police then set Irshad free but did not arrest Ranjha or any of his alleged accomplices at that time.

Soon, Christians from nearby villages gathered and decided not to bury Masih's body until the police arrested the alleged assailants.

Okara is the main district in Pakistani Punjab where the peasants' movement for land rights is very strong and mainly organized by Christian leaders. This alleged murder of a landowner, therefore, has larger implications for that movement as well as the local Christian community.

The chairman of Anjuman Muzareen Punjab (Tenants' Association of Punjab), Younus Iqbal, citing local political and criminal "undue influence," alleged that the police "never arrested killers of Christians."

In 2008, Javed Masih, a Christian politician, and in 2012 Akram Masih were both killed in Okara; in both cases, police let the suspects go with impunity, Iqbal said.

"The killing of Christians will stop when culprits will be brought to justice. So, this time we decided not to bury the dead until the suspects were arrested," he said.

Local sources told World Watch Monitor that the local police station registered a First Information Report (FIR) after yielding to the adamant stance of the Christians. The police then conducted raids and initially arrested Muhammad Sultan (alias Kali) and Muhammad Ramzan, Ranjha's brothers.

Deputy Superintendent Saadullah Khan told World Watch Monitor that the police had pledged in writing to arrest all the remaining suspects by Aug. 5.

Such assurances, according to Aneeqa Maria Akhtar, coordinator for The Voice, an organization working for religious freedom through litigation, are "unique" but have now proved to be false.

Akhtar said her legal team would contest the bail petitions, to be heard on Aug. 24.

An autopsy carried out at the Okara District Headquarters Hospital confirmed that the death was caused by a wound

inflicted by a “firearm weapon.”

Akhtar said that while the autopsy report agreed with the FIR, she had little hope the police would be impartial.

“If the police station will not be impartial, then we will get the investigation changed,” she said.