

Pakistani Muslims Employ 'Blasphemy' Threat in Land Grab

Tensions are still high in a village near here following Muslims' attempt to seize land from a Christian family by threatening to accuse them of **blasphemy**.

What began on Feb. 19 as a quarrel over a pigeon between Christian and Muslim youths at Nawa Pind Sabu Mohal village, in Sialkot's Pasroor area in northeast Punjab Province, grew into an occasion to jail some Christians in the overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim country, the Christians said.

Gulshan Masih, 20, told Compass that his younger brother, Saif Masih, 18, had quarreled with a young Muslim over a pigeon that led to about a half dozen boys from each group charging into a fistfight and later pelting each other with stones. With the Muslims throwing bricks and stones from inside a mosque at the young Christian men's homes, the skirmish ended when an elderly female relative of the Christians was wounded in their courtyard, Gulshan Masih said.

A few hours later, police officers arrived and took his father, 55-year-old Bashir Masih, 55, and 50-year-old uncle, Pervaiz Masih, into custody.

"The Muslims had accused us of desecrating the mosque by throwing stones at it," Gulshan Masih said. "My father and uncle were not even involved in the fight, yet they were taken into custody on **false charges**."

Muslim villagers have tried to drive Christians from the village on similarly petty pretexts, he said.

"We own land and cattle, and this may be one of the reasons

why the Muslims keep on picking fights with us over minor issues,” Masih said, recalling how relatives Saleem and Rasheed Masih were arrested on a **false blasphemy charge** in 1999 after a quarrel stemming from a Muslim ice cream vendor refusing to serve Saleem Masih from the same bowl used by Muslims. Rasheed Masih was not even present at the scene of the quarrel, Gulshan Masih said, but was also charged.

Their accusers had carried a grudge against them after having lost a civil land dispute. The brothers were convicted of blasphemy by a lower court, but the Lahore High Court freed them on March 19, 2003.

Hidden Motive

As soon as word spread in Sialkot that the Christian youths had “desecrated the mosque,” Muslims from nearby villages gathered at a police station to pressure officers into registering a false case against Bashir and Pervaiz Masih under Pakistan’s internationally condemned laws against blaspheming Islam, its prophet or the Quran.

Two days later, police took into custody eight more Christians—Gulshan Masih, his cousin Amir Masih, Mehmood Masih, Irshad Masih, Kashif Masih, Qamar Masih, Khuram Masih and Akmal Masih—in order to increase pressure on the Christians, according to Napoleon Qayyum, a Christian rights activist. He said it was evident that the Muslims were trying to seize a (one kanal is one-eighth of an acre) plot of land owned by Bashir Masih, as they demanded that he surrender it as a condition for the release of the **jailed Christians**.

Bashir’s land is located near a mosque run by one Hafiz Ishfaq, who is also a member of the **militant Islamist group**, the Sunni Tehreek, Qayyum said.

Police released Bashir and Pervaiz Masih and the other eight Christians on Feb. 22 with a warning that they would be charged with blasphemy if they did not meet the conditions set

the previous day by a “reconciliation committee” comprising the area’s notable Muslim leaders, Qayyum said—though in fact an influential family had argued successfully against imposing the condition on the Christians.

Muhammad Riaz Dar, the police inspector in-charge of the area, told Compass that the matter had been “amicably resolved” by the two parties. He declined to comment on the illegal detention.

Qayyum said the chain of events was clear.

“Look at how conveniently they threatened the Christians with involving them in a **fake blasphemy case** and were about to acquire the land without even paying a penny,” he said.

The intervention of the influential Muslim family on behalf of the Christians persuaded Hafiz Ishaq and others against trying to seize their land, Gulshan Masih said. Thus far the Muslims have backed off from that demand, but the village was still volatile, he said.

The other demand imposed by the “reconciliation committee” was that Pervaiz Masih’s son, Amir, not enter the village.

The Muslims suspect that Amir Masih had an affair with a local Muslim girl and took this opportunity to ban him from the village, said Qayyum.

He criticized police for playing into the hands of the Muslims.

“The police kept Bashir and Pervaiz in illegal custody for three days while eight others were detained for a day without any justification,” he said. “The police did not bother to take action against the Muslims involved in the fight. No Muslim was arrested, and no notice was taken of the injuries suffered by the Christians.”