

# Pakistani Muslims Fire on Christians in Land-Grab, Killing One

Muslim violence against Christians is rising—and it's not just in Egypt. Muslims in Pakistan's Mian Channu area in southern Punjab Province shot dead an unarmed Christian man and injured 21 others, six of them critically, in an attempted land-grab on Oct. 5.

Residents of the area told Compass by phone that 40 to 45 heavily-armed Muslims on 10 to 12 motorcycles, two tractor-trolleys and in a car reached Chak 134-16/L village, in Khanewal district, and forcibly entered the home of Adeel Kashif, a Christian carpenter who was living on a government-owned piece of land.

"The attackers forced their way into Kashif's house and started throwing the family's belongings onto the street," Wazir Masih, a Christian elder in the area, told Compass. "They also tore the clothes off Kashif's three female family members – Violet, 40, Parveen, 35, and Esther, 17, and tortured the family."

Masih said the assailants wanted to take illegal possession of the 18-marla piece of land (in Pakistan, one marla equals square yards).

"Since pre-partition days, a piece of government land is given to Kammis [laborers or craftsmen] for residence, and in return they help the villagers in whatever way they can," Masih said. "This allotment is made with the complete consensus of the villagers."

Before Kashif, a Muslim carpenter named Muhammad Iqbal was allowed to live on the property, he said.

"Iqbal lived there for over 10 years and moved out about two months ago," Masih said. "However, before leaving he prepared fake papers of the land in connivance with the Patwari [local revenue officer] and a local Muslim group and 'sold' it to them for 130,000 rupees [US\$1,480]," Masih said, adding that the entire process was fraudulent because no one can sell the government's land in a personal capacity.

He said that on Oct. 5, armed Muslims led by men of the area's powerful Jagrane family arrived at the house and tried to force the Christians out.

"Kashif's neighbors and some other villagers came out of their homes on hearing the commotion," Masih said. "The village comprises about 250 Christian families, and some 90 to 100 people gathered there and tried to persuade the Muslims not to dislodge the Christian carpenter illegally. None of the Christians present there was carrying any weapon, as no one was expecting such a harsh action by the Muslims."

Masih said the Muslims suddenly opened indiscriminate fire on the Christians, instantly killing 25-year-old Sajid Bashir Masih and seriously injuring 21 others, including women and children. He added that six of the injured were in critical condition, one of them Sajid Bashir Masih's younger brother, Haroon.

"The Christians had done nothing to provoke the Muslims into employing such brute force," Wazir Masih said. "They just opened fire on the defenseless people with their automatic rifles and shotguns."

Masih said that as soon as Sajid Bashir Masih succumbed to his injuries, some of the assailants fled the scene while others took refuge inside Kashif's house and started shooting at the villagers. He said the villagers immediately informed police, who arrived soon from a nearby station.

Police besieged the house and eventually managed to arrest 16

armed assailants, but the primary suspects remain free.

A First Information Report was registered against the attackers in Mian Channu's Saddar Police Station by the deceased's father, Bashir Masih, early yesterday.

Some of the injured Christians have been transferred to the District Headquarters Hospital, while those with serious bullet wounds have been admitted to the Nishtar Hospital in Multan.

A.D. Sahil, a Christian schoolteacher of the area, told Compass that the Christians suspected police complicity in the incident.

"The police station is just a couple of kilometers away, yet such a large group of heavily-armed Muslims managed to reach our village in broad daylight," he said, adding that there was tension between the two communities since the killing, and police have been deployed in the village. "The district police chief and the district's administrative head reached the village soon after the incident and held negotiations with us."

He added that, in view of the history of bitter inter-religious relations in the area, government officials have given assurances of protection to local Christians. The village is near Shantinagar, a Christian village attacked by thousands of Islamist extremists on Feb. 6, 1997.

The Muslims burned down 785 houses and four churches, and more than 2,500 Christians had to flee following allegations that a Christian villager had blasphemed against the Muslim prophet, Muhammad.

Christians make up only percent of Pakistan's population, which is more than 95 percent Muslim, according to Operation World.