

Pakistani Muslims Kidnap Christian Girl, Threaten Honor Killing

✖ An influential Muslim family in a village near Sheikhpura is holding a 17-year-old Christian girl hostage because one of her brothers allegedly eloped with a woman from the Muslim family.

The Muslim parents have threatened further retaliation against the Christian family if they do not produce their daughter, whom they have also threatened to publicly shoot dead as an “honor killing.”

An area clergyman identified only as Father Emmanuel called the situation “critical,” saying it has pitted the area’s 1,800 Muslim families against its 70 to 100 Christian families and could lead to violence.

“It’s always been like this,” Emmanuel said. “No one objects when a Christian girl is forcibly taken or dishonored by a Muslim man, but when a Muslim girl falls in love with a Christian boy it becomes a matter of their honor.”

Abid Masih, a welder at a factory in Sheikhpura, about 40 kilometers from the Punjab Province capital of Lahore, told Compass by telephone that the family was asleep in their home in Ghazi Minara village on May 13 when armed Muslims belonging to the village’s influential Gujjar family arrived at their doorstep.

“When I opened the door, the men told me that my younger brother, Sajid, had eloped with a girl from their family, and they had come to search for them,” Masih said.

He said he tried to convince them that the family did not know

Sajid's whereabouts, as he had not been home for two days, and they began threatening to harm Masih unless his family found the runaway couple and handed them over.

"By this time my maternal uncle and cousin had also come out, and together we tried to tell them that we didn't even know that Sajid was having an affair with the girl, so how could we know where they had gone?" Masih said.

The Muslim woman who allegedly eloped with Sajid was identified as Saleha; both are in their early 20s.

Masih said that the men then forcibly took him, his younger sister Rakhel, his uncle Mukhtar Gill and maternal cousin Indryas with them to their house.

"As soon as we reached their home, they started beating and cursing us and continued to torture us all night" in an effort to get them to disclose the couple's "hideout," he said.

Masih said that at daybreak on May 14, the Gujjars freed the three Christian men but kept Rakhel hostage in their home, saying that she would be returned only after they found and handed over the couple to them. Rakhel is in her early 20s.

"We were helpless," Masih said. "The Gujjars are very powerful, and we could not convince them to send Rakhel with us. Since Saturday we have been trying to locate Sajid but failed."

The Muslim family has sternly forbid them to report the abduction of Rakhel to police, warning that they would be unable to escape the consequences, he said.

On May 16, Masih said, Saleha's father, Aslam Gujjar, telephoned him and told him that if the family did not find the couple soon they would also abduct Rakhel's 17-year-old sister, Maryam. The next night, the Gujjars released Rakhel and forcibly took Maryam, he said.

Masih said the Gujjars have announced that they would shoot Saleha dead in the village center as an “honor killing” for eloping with the Christian.

“They have warned us that if we approach the police, they will turn the issue into a religious matter, and the bloodshed there would make the Gojra carnage small by comparison,” he said. At least seven Christians were burned alive by Muslim mobs in Gojra after the spread of a rumor of blaspheming Islam on Aug. 1, 2009.

Emmanuel, who has long ministered in the area, said he was trying to help reduce tensions.

“We are trying to talk to some local Muslim leaders to convince the Gujjars that it was an individual’s action, and they should not vent their anger at the innocent family, but it seems an uphill task at the moment,” he said.

Asif Aqeel, director of European Centre for Law and Justice’s branch office in Pakistan, told Compass that his organization was in contact with the family and was considering measures to address the situation.

“We were quite perturbed over Rakhel’s abduction and have been thinking of ways how to resolve the situation amicably, but now Maryam’s kidnapping has forced us to rethink our options,” he said.

Aqeel said the options include registration of a criminal case over the abductions and enlisting a court bailiff to recover Maryam from illegal detention, but this could exacerbate tensions, as the Gujjars are influential and would be forewarned by police of an impending raid.

“A failed raid may endanger the lives of the entire family and imperil the security of other Christians of the area,” he said, adding that family members were also caught in a dilemma as the Gujjars had threatened retaliation if they sought legal

assistance.

Aqeel said they were trying to gather mediators from both sides to convince the Gujjars not to hold the entire Christian family responsible for Sajid's apparent action.

"This is perhaps the safest way to avoid bloodshed and rescue the Christian girl, who is left at the mercy of the angry Muslims who feel they have been dishonored by a 'petty' Christian," he said.