

Pakistan's Christian Flood Victims Face Religious Discrimination

Many Christians living in the southern belt of Pakistan's Punjab Province who lost their houses in last year's floods remain homeless despite a plan by the Punjab government to allocate land to residents in the area, area Christians said.

Hameed Masih, a resident of Kot Addu in Muzaffargarh district, said the provincial government has not set a quota for granting of land to members of minority communities left homeless by the devastating floods that began in late July 2010.

The government has begun four plans in Kot Addu under which around 435 plots of five marlas (151 square yards) each were to be distributed among people who lost their property. Several people were allotted land last month, but so far no minority member has been given land, he said.

"Christians in this area are not rich people," Masih said. "They lost their houses and lands in the floods and should have been given a 5 percent quota in the scheme. Flood victims could have been easily accommodated, but the quota system has not been followed, and thus no minority member has been allotted land."

Aid distribution was also initially unfair, he said.

"There were some problems in the beginning, but then minority members protested and the issue was resolved," he said.

Masih added that Christian families in his village are receiving monthly stipends from the government.

The list of homeless people was prepared by local land

revenue officers who did not do so fairly, said another Christian. Sarwar Masih said he does not have property and does menial work for a living, but his name was not included in the list by the land revenue officers, or patwaris.

“Patwaris had to refer our names to higher authorities, but the names of those who could not ‘make them happy’ were not included in the list,” he said. “My name was not in the list, so I had no hope of getting land, though being homeless I fulfill the criteria.”

Areas where plots have been allotted include Gurmani Sharki, Jandeer Dueaja, Chak 568 and Chowk Sarwar Shaheed. There are some 8,500 registered minority voters, mostly Christians and Hindus, in these areas, with the total minority population said to be around 18,000.

“Several people who have been allotted plots under this scheme already have plenty of resources and land, while those who do not have property have been ignored,” said a Christian identified only as Wasim, who is minorities coordinator of Kot Addu.

He added that one person who owns 22 acres of agricultural land has been allotted more land under the government rehabilitation plan.

Napoleon Qayyum, a minority rights activist and leader of the Minorities Wing of the Pakistan People’s Party, said that under Pakistan’s constitution, minorities should be given a 5 percent quota in all government plans. He added that the Punjab government should adhere to that quota as well.

Officials from the local administration responded to the allegations by saying they did not directly handle flood rehabilitation, adding that plots were allotted to homeless people through a lottery draw.

Chaudhry Ehsanul Haq Nolatia, a local Member of the

Provincial Assembly from Kot Addu, said a committee was formed to look into the allotment.

“It is true that the government did not allocate any special quota for minorities in the scheme, but the plots were distributed through a draw,” he said.

He added that he would take up the issue in the Punjab Assembly.

Flooding from monsoon rains affected the Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan regions and the Indus River basin, submerging about one-fifth of Pakistan's land. Close to 2,000 people died, and some 20 million people lost their livelihood, property or other infrastructure in the flooding.