

Police Reluctant to Prosecute Attack on Pakistan Church

Armed Muslims disrupted the worship service of a church outside Lahore on May 29, cursing the congregation, smashing a glass altar and desecrating Bibles and a cross, Christian leaders said.

Police initially tried to protect the leader of the Muslim intruders, the nephew of a former Member of the Punjab Assembly, and instead of making arrests eventually pressured Christians to accept an apology from the accused, they said.

Pastor Ashraf Masih of Numseoul Presbyterian Church in Lakhoki Kahna village told Compass that Muhammad Shoaib, nephew of former MPA Mansha Sindhu, entered the church building accompanied by four men armed with rifles and pistols and started cursing the congregation for "disturbing the peace of the area by worshipping on loudspeakers," though the congregation was using loudspeakers only inside the church building.

Pastor Masih said the Muslims manhandled members of the congregation when they tried to stop the intruders.

"They were just out of control," Masih said. "Shoaib and his men broke the glass altar of the church, threw copies of the Bible towards the wall and desecrated the cross."

He added that this was not the first time Shoaib has harassed village Christians. Four months ago, Shoaib manhandled 70-year-old church elder Bohru Masih, telling Bohru to stop church services because he did not want to hear the Christians singing hymns, Pastor Masih said.

"The loudspeakers on mosques are used all day long for prayers and sermons," Pastor Masih said. "I fail to understand why

this man has turned against us the last few months.”

He said that after the Muslims left the church, he called police, who soon arrived. The Christians showed officers the damages and expressed their anger at the desecration of the Bible and cross. They led police to Shoaib’s house and returned to the church site, where journalists and representatives of various Christian support organizations had arrived.

“I was later told by a local Christian that the area’s police in-charge, Inspector Arshad Khan, was appointed there by Sindhu and he would try his best to save the former MPA’s nephew,” Pastor Masih said.

His fears that authorities would protect the gang leader bore out when police later informed Christians that they had not found Shoaib at his home.

“This was a complete lie, because Shoaib was at his home all this time, and someone told us that he had prepared lunch for Inspector Khan and the other policemen,” Pastor Masih said.

He and the other Christians decided to go to the police station to register their complaint with area Superintendent of Police Malik Awais.

“On reaching the police station, we found the officials present there reluctant to register a First Information Report against Sindhu’s nephew,” he said. “They also tried to pressure us by saying that we were making false allegations against the Muslims.”

He told police that their colleagues had witnessed the damage done to the church building, that journalists had also photographed the site, and that unless officers registered the case they would block the main road in protest.

“At this the police panicked and started requesting us to

reconcile with Shoaib and his men,” Pastor Masih said. “In the meantime, Awais also arrived at the police station, followed closely by Mansha Sindhu. Both men started asking us to let go of the case.”

Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif was present in the area that day to inaugurate a housing scheme, which added pressure on police to keep the Christians from blocking the road in protest, Christian leaders said.

Pastor Masih said that after an hour-long negotiation with Christian representatives, Sindhu agreed to make Shoaib publicly apologize, but that the police’s hostile attitude toward the Christians was evident in open support of Sindhu and his men.

“Shoaib said that he was drunk at that time and had lost his temper,” the pastor said.

A local newspaper quoted Awais, the police official, as saying that Shoaib was not drunk, had not carried a weapon and had not desecrated Bibles. The police superintendent declined to answer calls from Compass about why the former legislator’s nephew had apologized if he was innocent and why police hadn’t registered vandalism charges.

Sohail Johnson of Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan was among those who reached the village after hearing about the incident. He accused Tariq Javed, a local Christian politician, of pressuring area Christians into bowing to Sindhu’s demands.

“Some of us, including Pastor Ashraf, refused to give in to the pressure, but he [Javed] prevailed over the villagers, and ultimately they decided to pardon the Muslims,” he said, adding that fear of reprisal was the biggest element behind the reconciliation.

Napolean Qayyum, central leader of the Pakistan People’s Party

Minorities Wing, said Christians' political weakness was one of the main reasons for their inability to protest desecration of their church building.

"The Christians there were faced with a very influential Muslim politician," Qayyum said. "Had there been a strong Christian leadership in Pakistan, such incidents would not have happened this frequently."

He added that none of the Christian representatives at the police station had the courage to press the case further when the former legislator and his band of gunmen arrived.

A South Korean ministry team established the church in the village in 2004.