

Police Watch as Muslim Mob Ransacks Christian Neighborhood

A Muslim mob attacked Christian-owned shops and a church in the Francis Colony of Gujranwala, Pakistan on Wednesday following a dispute between Christian youth and a Muslim cleric a day earlier. The violence occurred only a few hours after Pakistan's Supreme Court condemned police for not intervening in anti-Christian riots on March 9 that resulted in some 180 Christian homes being torched in the Joseph Colony of Lahore. The court's admonishment, however, appeared to be disregarded by police who again failed to protect Christian property from being destroyed by a violent mob, advocates say.

Local Muslims, including a cleric, rebuked several Christian youth for playing music deemed un-Islamic too loudly while driving by a mosque in an auto-rickshaw on April 2. Some reports indicate that the music led to a "brawl" between the Christians and Muslims, while other sources suggest that the boys turned off the music and went on their way. In either case, rumors spread that the boys had disrespected Islam and should be punished.

"The cleric raised a clamor and accused the boys of showing disrespect to Islam," Pervaiz Masih, a resident of Francis Colony in Gujranwala, told *Pakistan Today*. "As word spread of the incident, we immediately went to the police post in our colony and shared our security concerns with them. The police told us not to worry and assured us that they would contain the situation but no measures were taken."

The next day, a Muslim mob from the nearby Naroki village attacked Christian-owned shops and property in the Francis Colony of Gujranwala and hurled stones at the local Catholic

Church. At least five Christians were injured in the violence. Despite assurances by local police that Christians in the colony would be protected, few measures were taken to contain the mob while it ransacked the Christian neighborhood.

“The police was doing what it does best—nothing!” Asif Barkat, who received minor injuries in the assault, told *Morning Star News*. “Their bias towards Christians is quite evident, because when the Muslims were raiding our church and property, they just watched, but when we confronted them, they started hitting us with batons and used live ammunition to deter us.”

The incident was the second time in the past month that police stood by while Muslims destroyed Christian property. Only hours prior to the attack, Pakistan’s Supreme Court denounced police for failing to protect Christians in the Joseph Colony of Lahore on March 9 when an enraged mob burned and looted some 180 Christian homes following accusations that a Christian man had blasphemed Islam.

“Is the Punjab government not ready to take risk for protection of Christians?” asked Justice Azmat Saeed during the Supreme Court hearing. “It’s disturbing and upsetting ... you cannot punish a community and desecrate their churches.”

Some believe police failed to protect the community because they sympathize with extremists and share the same ideology, which views Christians as inferior to Muslims. When policemen in riot gear were asked by a reporter why they allowed the mob to destroy Christian-owned property in Joseph Colony, they responded, “[Because] these are choorhas.”

Choorhas is a derogatory term that refers to “the severe caste-based discrimination prevalent in [Pakistan where] Muslims maintain that Christians/choorhas (used interchangeably) are ‘untouchables’ (meaning a lower caste),” Hashim bin Rashid, the general secretary of the Awami Workers Party in Lahore, wrote in an op-ed published by

Pakistan Today. "It was as if police had invited the mob to ransack, loot and burn Joseph Colony as they stood and watched."

Support for Islamic extremism is widespread in Pakistan and transcends beyond the country's police forces. According to a recent survey conducted by the British Council, 38 percent of Pakistani youth support Shariah (Islamic law) as the best legal system to govern the country. Rights advocates claim that Shariah plays into the hands of extremists, including the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaida, and is often used to persecute religious minorities.

Support for extremist ideology was clearly seen in Wednesday's assault when a simple disagreement between Muslims and Christian youth was enough to stir religious fervor and escalate into a full-blown attack against an entire Christian community.

"The dispute had no religious background; however the Muslim attackers tried to turn it to a religious conflict, which we condemn," Nadeem Bashir Ghazi, a local activist, told ICC. "Christians are peace-loving people and do not want religious conflicts with their fellow countrymen. April 3 will be remembered as a 'black day' in the history of Francis Colony."