

Tensions Rise in Kashmir, India after 'Guilty Verdict,' Fatwa

Christian workers are fleeing India's Kashmir Valley after a *Shariah*, or **Islamic law**, court issued a "guilty verdict" against three Christian leaders, issued a **fatwa** against Christian schools and allegedly launched a door-to-door campaign to bring converts back to Islam.

The court, which has no legal authority, found the Rev. Chander Mani Khanna, pastor of All Saints Church in Srinagar, Dutch Catholic missionary Jim Borst and Christian worker Gayoor Messah guilty of "luring the valley Muslims to Christianity," *The Times of India* daily reported on Dec. 19.

The three had already left the region apparently due to rising tensions.

Headed by Kashmir Grand Mufti Bashir-ud-din Ahmad, the shariah court also "directed" the state government to take over the management of all Christian schools in the region, the daily added.

"I fled with my wife and children, as I was not feeling safe in Srinagar," a Christian worker from Kashmir told Compass on condition of anonymity. "A group of **Muslims** visited my house twice, threatening my parents with a social boycott if they failed to produce me."

The source said he and some of his friends left Srinagar, the summer capital of northern India's Jammu and Kashmir state, a few days before the sharia court ordered three Christian workers to leave Kashmir Valley, in the Muslim-majority region of the state.

Another source told Compass that some men had visited his family and those of his friends in Srinagar asking for their whereabouts.

“They had the names of all my local Christian friends when they came to my parents’ house, and they asked for the names of more Christians in the area,” he said. “Muslim men are going to every believer’s home and asking their families to ensure that their children return to Islam. They are using Islamic scriptures to persuade the families, warning that if their members do not reconvert their households will face ostracism.”

The source added that those who have fled may not be able to return to their homes for at least a year.

“We have our family with children—where should we send our kids to school?” he said. “Where should we stay? We don’t have any answers.”

He said the men who are visiting Christians’ homes are sent from the many committees the sharia court has formed to prevent conversions. The mufti could not be contacted for comment.

Separately, well-known Muslim clergyman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq recently launched a website, , entitled “Council for Protection of Faith,” for a committee formed in November, “after numerous cases of apostasy came into light” and “to thwart nefarious designs of pervasive forces and the deep-rooted conspiracy of making youth apostate and defectors by giving them concessions and benefits secretly.”

Besides the “guilty verdict” against Pastor Khanna, Borst and Messa, mufti deputy Nasir-ul-Islam reportedly said an investigation against Parvez Samuel Kaul, principal of a local **Christian missionary school**, was underway.

The court also ordered all Christian schools to teach Islam

and other faiths.

"Given the Muslim majority character of the valley, the Muslim students should be taught Islam, and daily prayer written by Syed Mohammad Iqbal should also be sung in the morning prayers," Nasir-ul-Islam told *The Times of India*.

Muslim leaders began to rally against Christians after a video posted on YouTube last October showed Muslim youth being baptized at the All Saints Church. Soon thereafter, the sharia court "summoned" Pastor Khanna to explain why Muslim youth were converted and whether they were offered money.

State police arrested Pastor Khanna on Nov. 19 on charges of hurting religious sentiments of Muslims by "converting" their youth. He was released on bail on Dec. 1. The court later summoned Borst, but he asked the mufti to meet him at his church site. The mufti declined. The court found Christian worker Messah "guilty" because he was also seen with Pastor Khanna in the video.

The All India Christian Council warned that the sharia court's verdict could encourage extremist elements to indulge in violence.

"The church does not accept as genuine any conversion brought about by fraud or force," Dr. John Dayal, the group's secretary general, said in a statement.

He pointed out that a fact-finding team that went to Srinagar late last year found no evidence of force or fraud in baptisms. "Each baptism has been proven to be voluntary."

There are only about 400 Christians in the Kashmir region, with 300 of them living in Srinagar, according to the fact-finding team.

The council also said the Christian community did not accept the jurisdiction of the sharia courts anywhere in India.

The shariah court was careful in its “verdict,” one of the area sources observed, noting that the three who were ordered to leave are not permanent residents of Kashmir. He questioned the fatwa against Christian schools.

“The court issued a fatwa against Christian schools because some business-minded Muslims want greater control over these schools, which are known for providing quality education,” he said.

Local residents saw an element of politics behind the tensions. The fact-finding team, which visited Kashmir from Nov. 29 to Dec. 2, learned from local people that some extremist groups and other vested interests had been seeking to use the issue of conversion in their confrontation with the state government, political parties and moderate Islamic groups.

They were “looking to score political points against each other, and any excuse was good enough to foment trouble,” one resident said. The state government apparently sided with the extremists to preempt any unrest, local residents told the fact-finding team.

While most Muslims in Kashmir are peaceful adherents of Sufi Islam, some are influenced by Wahhabism and are extremists.