

25 August 2023



Jubilee Campaign Statement Regarding Blasphemy-Related Violence Targeting Christians in Pakistan

Jubilee Campaign expresses great concern and condemns in the strongest terms the targeted violent attacks upon Christian institutions in Jaranwala, Faisalabad, Pakistan, following reported blasphemy allegations leveled against Christian citizens. Videos circulating online have depicted angry mobs comprising thousands of civilians setting fire to, vandalizing, and desecrating churches as well as other holy sites, including Christian cemeteries.¹ Additionally, mobs have looted church property and furnishings of some 100 Christian homes whose residents - around 500 or so - had timely evacuated prior to the onslaught in the interest of safety. Among the approximately 26 religious facilities targeted for destruction and plunder are the Salvation Army Church, United Presbyterian Church, Allied Foundation Church, Shehroonwala Church, Full Gospel Assembly Church, as well as Catholic and Pentecostal churches, all of which are located in the city's Issa Nagri district.

These horrific assaults on public Christian properties and homes of Christian residents were in reported response to an allegation that Christian brothers Rocky and Raja Saleem had written blasphemous and insulting remarks on torn pages of the Quran which were then affixed to a wall and subsequently disposed of by a third Christian individual. One of the two individuals accused of writing the problematic content has attested that he had been framed, recalling the horror he felt that morning to see the torn and desecrated pages in question which additionally included his name and photographs of himself and his brother. As has been raised by numerous anonymous individuals, it is incomprehensible that an individual would write blasphemous remarks and incriminate themselves by including their own name and self-portrait.² The accusations leveled against the brothers are widely conjectured to be fabricated, as there exists a concerning precedent by which accusers concoct stories and intentionally plant 'evidence' to implicate Pakistani Christians of blasphemy, usually with their targets being individuals with whom they have grievances and previous disputes. Both brothers have resolutely asserted their innocence.

As is par for the course regarding collective and violent indignation stemming from perceived insults to Islam and its revered figures, as well as desecration of Islamic holy literature, the escalation and

¹ NPR, "[Mob in Pakistan burned a church and Christian homes after blasphemy accusations](#)", 16 August 2023. ; Sophia Saifi, "[Churches set ablaze in Pakistan's Punjab province after accusations of blasphemy](#)", *CNN*, 16 August 2023. ; Kamran Chaudhry, "[Six churches attacked in blasphemy riot in Pakistan](#)", *Union of Catholic Asian News*, 16 August 2023.

² Nasir Sayeed, "[Blasphemy Allegations Spark Violent Protests and Church Attacks in Jaranwala, Pakistan](#)", *Centre for Legal Aid Assistance & Settlement (CLAAS UK)*, 16 August 2023. ; Morning Star News, "[Blasphemy Accusation Sparks Attack on Christians in Pakistan](#)", 18 August 2023. ; Hannah Mitchell, "[Churches burned in Jaranwala amidst allegations of blasphemy](#)", *Christian Today*, 17 August 2023.

acceleration of attacks upon faith minority communities are insufficiently countered by security forces. Notwithstanding authorities' prompt deployment of police officers to the site of mob activity in Jaranwala, churches had already fallen victim to arson and Christian civilians had been physically assaulted in the frenzy, and the deficient group of authorities were exponentially outnumbered and overpowered by mob participants. The criminality has been further aggravated due to inconsistent and ambiguous remarks by local Muslim elders and clerics, some of whom have joined authorities in dispelling vicious mobs and others who have summoned irate Muslims to mosques and provoked them to protest against Amir and the broader Christian community. Perpetrators appeared to be placated only after authorities made promises to arrest the accused blasphemers.

The violence unfolding in Jaranwala serves as just one example among a catalogue of previous similar incidents - with equally devastating consequences - which have occurred across Pakistan in recent years, one of the most recent and horrific of which being the lynching of Sri Lankan national Priyantha Diyawadana on blasphemy accusations in December 2021.³ A colleague of Diyawadana, the general manager of Rojoco Industries based in Sialkot, spread false accusations that Diyawadana had maliciously removed from the factory walls a poster with Quranic text on it, an act which is considered sacrilegious according to the Muslim population, and the Pakistan Penal Code which is modeled after Sharia jurisprudence. It was later concluded, however, that Diyawadana had removed the poster in preparations for upcoming renovations to the facility, including repainting, and that his minimal proficiency in the Punjabi language hindered him from understanding the religious significance of the poster's contents.

Pakistan's Penal Code of 1860 includes an entire chapter regarding "offenses relating to religion". Articles 295 through 298 criminalize acts including "injuring or defiling a place of worship, with intent to insult the religion of any class"; "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class"; "defiling, etc., of copy of Holy Quran"; "use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet"; "disturbing religious assembly"; "trespassing on burial places"; and "uttering words, etc., with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings".⁴ Following a ruling by the Federal Sharia Court, Article 295-C prohibiting the "use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet" was amended in 1991 to extend the corresponding punishment to the death penalty for transgressions thereof.⁵

In January 2023, Pakistan's National Assembly voted to expand the nation's blasphemy laws to impose a term of imprisonment between at minimum ten years and at maximum a life sentence for any individual convicted of insulting any person connected to the Prophet, such as his companions, wives, and relatives.⁶ The sentence additionally levies a fine of one million Pakistani Rupees and "makes the charge of blasphemy an offense for which bail is not possible". More recently in August 2023, the Assembly's bicameral counterpart, the Senate, confirmed the bill, entitled the Criminal Laws (Amendment) Act 2023⁷, formalizing the expansion of blasphemy laws in Pakistan and once again exhibiting the nation's nonconformity to international human rights standards, notably the right to freedom of religion or belief. Earlier, in mid-June 2023 concerns among faith minorities and international religious freedom activists were compounded by the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz political party's reluctant concession to the

³ Mubasher Bukhari & Asif Shahzad, "[Lynching of Sri Lankan manager by Pakistani mob was anti-Islam, court says](#)", *Reuters*, 19 April 2022.

⁴ *Pakistan: Penal Code [Pakistan], Act No. XLY*, 6 October 1860.

⁵ Jubilee Campaign, [Human Rights Abuses Committed in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan: Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review](#), November 2017.

⁶ Salman Masood, "[Pakistan Strengthens Already Harsh Laws Against Blasphemy](#)", *The New York Times*, 22 January 2023.

⁷ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, "[Pakistan: concerns about two Bills that increase blasphemy punishment and fail minorities](#)", 11 August 2023.

Islamist extremist Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan political party to permit the trial of individuals accused of blasphemy not only according to Article 295 of the penal code, but also the 1997 Anti-Terrorism Act.⁸

Despite the fact that the death penalty is rarely carried out upon individuals convicted of blasphemy in Pakistan, legal codification of capital punishment for blasphemy and other non-violent faith-related conduct emboldens state and nonstate actors to take measures into their own hands and commit extrajudicial killings of alleged offenders and also has a “chilling effect on the legitimate exercise of fundamental human rights.”⁹ Perpetrators who are undertaking mob violence in Jaranwala have completely demolished one of the accused’s homes, but both individuals have thus far fortunately evaded premature deaths. Myriad other Pakistani faith minorities - most frequently Christian and Ahmadi Muslims - have been murdered on accusations of blasphemy by Islamist extremists in their community, though more often in isolated incidents rather than as part of widespread aggressive protests like in the case of Priyantha Diyawadana. In July 2020, Ahmadi man and Pakistani-American citizen Tahir Ahmed, who was reportedly lured into participating in a religious debate in which he made allegedly blasphemous remarks, was shot six times and killed while standing trial in Peshawar by a Muslim teenager who had evaded security personnel; the perpetrator was praised as a holy warrior by the radical Muslim community.¹⁰ In one unique incident in which a state actor was the malfeasant, Muhammad Waqas was slashed to death by a 21-year-old rookie police constable who was convinced that the victim had previously committed blasphemy despite that Waqas, who was earlier imprisoned for some time, had recently had his sentence quashed on appeal and had been absolved of his charges.¹¹

Furthermore, countless Pakistani faith minorities have been convicted of blasphemy, often on insufficient evidence or lack thereof, and despite multiple infringements upon their rights to due process. Owing to these miscarriages of justice, defendants are discarded to languish in prison, occasionally in solitary confinement. Christian man Anwar Kenneth, who was originally arrested in September 2001 and sentenced to capital punishment in 2002 for rejecting the Prophethood and the Quran, has remained on death row for more than 22 years to date.¹² Also imprisoned by Pakistani authorities is Christian man Zafar Bhatti who has spent eleven years behind bars facing the death penalty on baseless accusations of sending blasphemous text messages.¹³ In one highly publicized case, Christian couple Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar remained on death row for seven years following their conviction in 2014 of blasphemy on allegations that they, similarly to Bhatti’s case, had sent blasphemous messages to a Muslim cleric; despite numerous inconsistencies and dubious details regarding their case, they were not exonerated and released until June 2021.¹⁴

⁸ India Today, [“Pakistan to try blasphemy suspects under terrorism charges after pact with radical Islamist group”](#), 19 June 2023.

⁹ UN General Assembly, *Moratorium on the use of the death penalty*, [A/75/309](#), 13 August 2020.

¹⁰ Emma Graham-Harrison, [“He was such a kind soul’: daughter’s fight for US man killed at Pakistan blasphemy trial”](#), *The Guardian*, 30 August 2020. ; Umar Farooq & Jibrán Ahmad, [“Holy warrior’ selfies: Pakistan teen feted for killing U.S. blasphemy suspect”](#), *Reuters*, 9 August 2020.

¹¹ David Averre, [“Man cleared of committing blasphemy in Pakistan is hacked to death ‘by policeman who refused to believe he was innocent”](#), *Daily Mail*, 3 July 2021.

¹² Jubilee Campaign, [“Anwar Kenneth, a Christian Man on Death Row on Blasphemy Charges, Files Final Appeal Against the Death Sentence in Supreme Court of Pakistan”](#).

¹³ Church in Chains, [Zafar Bhatti](#), 11 March 2022. ; Release International, [Prisoner Profile: Zafar Bhatti – Pakistan](#). ; Voice of the Martyrs, [“PAKISTAN: Zafar Bhatti Recovers from Heart Attack in Prison”](#), 24 September 2020. ; British Asian Christian Association, [“Pakistan’s longest serving blasphemy convict has been given death sentence”](#), 4 January 2022.

¹⁴ Jubilee Campaign, [Shagufta and Shafqat](#). ; Church in Chains, [Shagufta & Shafqat](#).

The Human Rights Committee¹⁵, Human Rights Council¹⁶, United Nations Secretary-General¹⁷, and UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief¹⁸ have each reiterated that anti-blasphemy laws are incontrovertibly incompatible with human rights and that “the death penalty should never be imposed as a sanction for non-violent conduct such as apostasy [and] blasphemy....” The UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions additionally raised concerns that “research and advocacy on the death penalty...have paid little attention to how certain existing capital offenses, including as they exist in some countries...blasphemy, target specific minorities.”¹⁹

Jubilee Campaign joins the UN bodies’ calls on Pakistan to comply with its obligations as a UN Member State and as a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Pakistan must (1) work towards the full repeal of Articles 295 through 298 of the Penal Code which criminalize non-violent religious conduct perceived as blasphemy; (2) enforce existing penal code articles that criminalize perjury and false accusations; (3) provide protection and security to individuals accused of blasphemy in light of rising mob violence; and (4) release unconditionally and with immediate effect all religious prisoners of conscience who have been unjustly interned.

Jubilee Campaign vehemently decries the religiously-motivated cruelty and destruction taking place in Jaranwala. We are, however, encouraged by the government of Punjab’s actions to arrest some 180 perpetrators for their incendiary and violent activities; the dispatch of 6500 police to Jaranwala for assistance, including female officers who are providing specialized security for Christian women and girls; and promises of compensate made to victims of the anti-Christian hate crimes.²⁰ We additionally urge Pakistan to (1) continue to take measures to restore order and security in the district; (2) formally prosecute perpetrators of arson and violent attacks, and those who incited such criminal conduct, and release those accused of blasphemy; (3) provide immediate assistance to the victims of the mob violence in need of food and water aid due to unanticipated and indefinite displacement; and (4) provide funding, resources, and manpower to rebuild damaged Christian churches and residences.

¹⁵ UN Human Rights Committee, *Concluding observations on the initial report of Pakistan*, [CCPR/C/PAK/CO/1](#), 23 August 2017.

¹⁶ UN Human Rights Council, *Capital punishment and the implementation of the safeguards guaranteeing protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty*, [A/HRC/42/28](#), 28 August 2019.

¹⁷ UN Human Rights Council, *Question of the death penalty: Report of the Secretary-General*, [A/HRC/45/20](#), 13 August 2020.

¹⁸ UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief*, [A/HRC/40/58](#), 5 March 2019, para. 59.

¹⁹ UN General Assembly, *Extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions: Note by the Secretary-General*, [A/76/264](#), 3 August 2021.

²⁰ Asif Chaudhry, “[Punjab forms JTs to arrest Jaranwala attackers](#)”, *Dawn*, 25 August 2023. ; Asian News International, “[Pakistan: 160 accused arrested for involvement in Jaranwala arson case](#)”, 20 August 2023. ; Timothy Jones, “[Pakistan to Compensate Christians After Blasphemy Riots](#)”, *DW News*, 21 August 2023.



Contact us:

jubileecampaign.org

Tel: +1 (703) 503-2260

Fax: (703) 503-0792

Email: information@jubileecampaign.org

9689-C Main Street

Fairfax, VA 22031

United States of America