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Christians, Muslims unite for justice over couple burned in kiln

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Christian and Muslim leaders meet with Mohammad Sarwar

In the two weeks since a Christian couple was killed by a Muslim mob in Pakistan, local leaders from both religions have come together repeatedly to call for justice in the matter, and an end to the misuse of blasphemy allegations. On Nov. 4, Shahzad Masih and his wife Shama were reportedly killed and their bodies burned by a mob after they were accused of desecrating the Quran. The couple lived in Kot Radha Kishan, a city located nearly 40 miles southwest of Lahore. The couple worked at a brick kiln, and it has been reported

that the kiln owner noticed Shama burning some belongings of her recently-deceased father-in-law, and charged that some pages she burnt were from the Quran — he then detained them. They owed him money, and he refused to release them without being paid. It was then announced from local mosques that the couple had desecrated the Quran, and a mob forced their way into the room where the Masihis were held, and beat them. Reports vary as to whether or not the couple's bodies were thrown into the kiln before or after their deaths. The incident has led to calls for better justice and increased solidarity throughout Pakistan. On Nov. 18, a group of Muslim and Christian scholars and religious leaders met with Mohammad Sarwar, governor of Punjab, the province in which Kot Radha Kishan is located, “to express our deep shock on this barbaric act of burning alive, the fears of Pakistani Christian religious minority and our reservation on the follow up of this heinous crime,” according to a report by Fr. James Channan, O.P., director of the Peace Center Lahore. The meeting “was also to listen to the point of view of the government of Pakistan and what strategy it has adopted to deal with such a crime and would justice be ever done?” Fr. Channan was joined at the meeting by Hafiz Tahir Mehmood Ashrafi, chairman of the Pakistan Ulama Council, and two Anglican bishops. Sarwar condemned the killing, Fr. Channan reported, and “said that the case of Radha Kishan is a test case for the government of Pakistan. We want that all those who are involved in this heinous crime must be given exemplary punishment so that no one else dares to commit such a crime in (the) future. Our government will make sure that all the criminals are brought to justice.” Robert Azariah, the Anglican bishop of Raiwind, said that it was unfortunate that the government had failed to punish the perpetrators of such acts in the past, saying that had those criminals been punished then such incidents would not have taken place. “The miscreants must be punished and all those who misuse these laws must be given exemplary punishment so that no other person dares to misuse these laws,” Fr. Channan reported him saying.

The Dominican also noted that Tahir Ashrafi lamented that in the past, “no one was punished who attacked Christian villages and colonies. That is big question for me ... if they were penalized then this incident would have not taken place.” “He said we are with our fellow Christian citizens and we lament and mourn with them. He said that a group of 100 Ulama went to the site of the crime and condoled our Christian brothers and sisters. We are with you and will raise voice so that justice is done to you.” The Pakistan Ulama Council had already, on Nov. 12, demanded “that judicial inquiry should be conducted into the Kot Radha Kishan tragedy and the culprits must be brought to justice.” On Nov. 18, the kiln owner and more than five other suspects in the case of the Masih's were jailed on judicial remand, according to the Daily Times, based in Lahore. The previous day, relatives of the Masih's said at a press conference that they were being pressured to withdraw the case against those who are believed responsible for their deaths, with both threats and promises of land and money. Sajid Ishaq, chairman of the Pakistan Interfaith League, said “We want the government to relocate the family to a safer place to protect them from the people pressuring them,” according to The Express Tribune. On Nov. 13, the Peace Center Lahore, United Religious Initiative, and the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum of Minhaj ul Quran organized a peaceful protest march in Lahore over the Masih's' tragedy. Minhaj ul Quran reported that its secretary general, Khurram Nawaz Gandapur, “said that those who have perpetrated this horrible crime are not only enemies of Islam but also of humanity” and “that the purpose of this interfaith prayer and protest is to give message to the peace-loving people of the world that they should play their individual and collective role for establishment of peace.” In addition, the Pakistani bishops' conference and the Major Superiors Leadership Conference of Pakistan on Nov. 12 sent joint letters to several government officials, and to the U.N. Council on Human Rights in Islamabad, demanding that the government take action to protect minorities in the wake of the Masih's' case. The matter “is a grim reminder that intolerance in the name of religion in Pakistan has escalated beyond the rule of law,” read the text of the letter, which was made available to the international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (<http://churchinneed.org>). “The situation has now reached beyond the application of laws for justice, to where crowds and police are repeatedly setting precedents for street justice ... such incidents reflect lack of governance.” The letter, signed by Archbishop Joseph Coutts of Karachi and Fr. Pascal Paulus, O.P., presented six demands to the Pakistani government, including that all those involved in the crime or inciting the violence be dealt with according to law, that clerics responsible for inciting violence through mosque loudspeakers be held accountable; that the government “take immediate measures to stop the misuse of the Blasphemy laws”; and that mob violence be curtailed by “training and sensitizing its police force and hold them accountable in future for any negligence on their part.” Pakistan's state religion is Islam, and around 97 percent of the population is Muslim. The nation has adopted blasphemy laws which impose strict punishment on those who desecrate the Quran or who defame or insult Muhammad. The blasphemy laws are said to be often used to settle scores or to persecute minorities; while non-Muslims constitute only 3 percent of the Pakistani population, 14 percent of blasphemy cases have been levied against them. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2013 report cited “chronic” sectarian and religiously motivated violence in the country, as well as the Pakistan government perpetrating and tolerating “systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief.”