

Christians' homes burnt over 'desecration'

Published August 1, 2009



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TOBA TEK SINGH, July 31 A mob burnt 75 houses of Christians over the alleged desecration of the Holy Quran in Azafi Abadi at Chak 95-JB on Gojra-Faisalabad Road, 32 kilometres from here, late on Thursday, Christian leaders said.

Christian leaders Atif Jamil Pagaan and Ashfaq Fateh told a press conference that 75 houses were burnt and two churches ransacked by the residents of a neighboring village over reports that Mukhtar Maseeh, Talib Maseeh and his son Imran Maseeh had desecrated the papers inscribed with Holy Quran verses at a wedding ceremony.

Dawn learnt from sources that 50 houses were damaged when the mob in a frenzy of rage held a jury where Talib Maseeh was asked to offer apology over the incident. Talib, however, denied the incident and refused to offer apology. In the ensuing developments, hundreds of the people attacked Azafi Basti.

Before the arrival of the mob, the residents had fled which gave a walkover to the mob which put on fire 50 houses. The ablaze also burnt a few cattle.

District Police Officer (DPO) Inkisar Khan fielded MPA Bilal Asghar Warraich and Maulana Noor Ahmad to calm down the mob. The DPO also suspended the Gojra Sadar station house officer at the demand of the mob.

The mob blocked Gojra-Faisalabad Road to block the entrance of fire brigades to the village. Federal Minister for Minorities Shahbaz Bhatti and Punjab Minorities and Human Rights Minister Kamran Michael visited the locality on Friday and urged both sides to remain peaceful.

They said the Christians would be compensated for their loss. Minority MPAs Rafiq Pervaiz and Khalil Tahir Sandhu also visited the village.

DPO Inkisar Khan said a case has been registered under section 295-B of the Pakistan Penal Code against Mukhtar Maseeh, Talib Maseeh and Imran Maseeh without any arrest.

Local ulema and traders demanded the arrest of the accused and announced a complete strike on Saturday (today). Former MNA M Hamza condemned the violence against Christians as well as the alleged desecration act. In a press statement, he demanded a judicial probe into the incident.

Labour Party leader Tariq Mahmood, National Workers' Party Punjab Secretary Rana Azam, Labour Qaumi Movement's Shabbir Ahmad and Kissan Committee President Chaudhry Fateh Muhammad condemned the violence.

INTERFAITH LEAGUE Expressing his anguish over the violence perpetrated by communal forces against Christian minorities, Interfaith League chairman Sajid Ishaq says it is condemnable to make religion a basis for committing violent acts against humanity.

He said that nation was trying to build a peaceful and stable society in Pakistan and such attacks hindered any progress in this regard.

He demanded that the thugs who carried out the attacks should be strictly punished so that no one could dare again to commit such a crime.