



Fearful Pakistani Christians make home in forest



Pakistani Christians from a neighborhood where a girl was arrested on alleged blasphemy charges pray in a clearing of an urban forest in Islamabad, Pakistan on Monday, Aug. 27, 2012. A group of Christians has cut down trees to clear land and has begun to build a church out of branches after leaving their neighborhood in fear when one of their own was accused of violating Pakistan's strict blasphemy laws. (AP Photo/B.K. Bangash) (/ AP)

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ISLAMABAD — Having fled their homes in the latest spasm of Pakistani religious strife, a few hundred Christians have camped in a forest in the Pakistani capital, cut down trees and are using the branches to build a church.

Their ordeal began when a Christian girl in their poor Islamabad neighborhood was accused by a neighbor of burning pages of the Quran - a blasphemy by Pakistani law that can mean life in prison.

A week after the girl's arrest, much remains in question: her age - 11 to 16 in conflicting reports; mental condition - Down syndrome has been mentioned; and what exactly she was burning - there's little evidence that Quran pages were involved.

But as word spread, hundreds of people gathered outside her house demanding action, and on Aug. 20 police arrested the girl pending an investigation. (The Associated Press is withholding her name because it does not generally identify underage suspects.)

Most Christians in the neighborhood fled - some 600 families according to one interfaith group. Some said their landlords evicted them. A few have returned.

One of those who moved into the forest on Sunday was Sumera Zahid, who was busy feeding her three children and her parents.

"We used to come here to collect wood for fuel so we find it a suitable place for shelter," she said. "Here it is not anybody's home, nobody's land. Let us live here in safety."

On Monday their pastor, Arif Masih, spoke to them by the frame of branches they were lashing together for their church.

"We are thankful to the Lord for this land although here is no water and food, but rest assured the Lord will create water fountains and provide all fruits here for you if you remain patient and suffer these hardships, thanking the Lord," he said.

Blasphemy is an extremely sensitive issue in this 95-percent Muslim nation of 190 million people, and cases often grab huge attention here and abroad.

Crowds have been known to beat or kill suspected blasphemers. Last year two prominent politicians who criticized the blasphemy law were murdered, one by his own bodyguard who then attracted adoring mobs. In July, thousands of people dragged a Pakistani man accused of desecrating the Quran from a police station, beat him to death and set his body alight.

So volatile is the issue that public figures appear loath to speak out on the latest episode. The government has made little substantive comment, and no police protection was evident at the forest encampment.

On Monday the All Pakistan Ulema Council, an umbrella organization of Muslim clerics, held a news conference together with the Pakistan Interfaith League, the group that reports 600 families have fled and is campaigning to return them to their homes.

The two groups called for an investigation into whether the girl was wrongly accused and what role religious extremism played. League chairman Sajid Ishaq demanded government compensation for the displaced Christians, as well as protection.

Critics say the blasphemy laws are often used in vendettas and score-settling. Sensitivities are also heightened by Western reactions to such incidents, such as the U.S. State Department statement calling the latest case “deeply disturbing.”

At the news conference, the head of the clerics’ council, Maulana Tahir-ul-Ashrafi, told the outside world not to interfere, saying Pakistan would provide justice for the girl and her community.

Meanwhile, Nooran Bashir, who had fled a few hours after the girl’s arrest, was back in her home Monday.

“I don’t know whether she burned pages of some holy book or not, but we all had to abruptly leave our homes to save our lives,” she said. She said one of her sons came back with her, but her other children were too frightened and she sent them to relatives.

She said Muslims asked the Christians not to worship in their church, and if they did, to refrain from singing.

But others were not ready to return. About 200 Christians, mostly men, protested in front of the city administration offices Monday, demanding permission to stay in the

clearing. About another 100 people, mostly women and children, were back at the clearing.

“We don’t have a big list of demands,” said one Christian resident, Salim Masih. “We have cleared this place with our hands, and we have laid the first foundation of a small church here. Although this is a mere skeleton made of tree branches, this is the holy home of God. This should be respected.”

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Associated Press writer Munir Ahmed contributed to this report.

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