

Fearful Pakistani Christians make home in forest

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ISLAMABAD — In the middle of a forest in the Pakistani capital, 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.

The roughly 100 men, women and children who slept overnight on the ground Sunday in a clearing just a few miles from the seat of the Pakistani government are fallout from the case of a young Christian girl accused by a neighbor of burning pages from Islam's holy book, the Koran.

The case has spotlighted attention on the country's blasphemy laws that can result in life in prison or even death for those accused of violating them.

"We used to come here to collect wood for fuel so we find it a suitable place for shelter," said Sumera Zahid, who was feeding her three children and her parents. "Here it is not anybody's home, nobody's land. Let us live here in safety."

Their ordeal began a little less than two weeks ago when a Christian girl was accused by a neighbor of burning pages of the Koran. Much of the case is still in question, including whether the girl is mentally impaired and what exactly she was burning.

But as word of the blasphemy accusation spread, hundreds of people gathered at her house demanding something be done to the girl. The police eventually arrested her and are investigating whether she broke any law.

The Associated Press is withholding the girl's name. The AP does not generally identify juveniles under 18 who are accused of crimes.

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Most Christians in the neighborhood fled, fearing retribution from their Muslim neighbors. Christian residents also reported that their landlords evicted them.

After living with relatives and in churches, many of the Christians arrived at this clearing on Sunday, determined to build a home.

“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 hardship, thanking the Lord,” said Arif Masih, their pastor.

He was speaking Monday to a group of Christians, mostly women, sitting next to the beginnings of a church. The parishioners had gathered tree branches and had begun to tie them together in the shape of a frame for their future house of worship.

The area is a few hundred yards from the street, and people chopped down trees and cut grass to make some space for themselves.

The issue of blasphemy is an extremely sensitive one in Pakistan, where critics say it is often abused to settle vendettas or as retribution.

Many Christians, who make a small minority in Pakistan, live in fear of being accused of blasphemy.

The case of the Christian girl has garnered huge attention in Pakistan and abroad in part because some reports have suggested she has Down syndrome.

A medical review is being conducted to determine the girl's mental state, said Sajid Ishaq, chairman of the Pakistan Interfaith League, a group that works to improve relations between various religious and sectarian groups.

He said about 600 families have fled the neighborhood where the Christian girl lived and have been staying with family and friends.

"They are actually fearful. And we are trying our best to send them home safely. And also we are demanding to the government that they should give them compensation for their loss. And protection as well," he said.

Mr. Ishaq took part in a press conference Monday with the All Pakistan Ulema Council, a group of Muslim clerics and scholars from across the country, to discuss the blasphemy case.

The groups called for an investigation into whether the girl was wrongly accused and what role religious extremism played in igniting the case. They demanded that all Christians be allowed to return to their neighborhood.

The degree of international attention on this case has not gone unnoticed in Pakistan, where many already feel their country is unfairly portrayed as being a haven for terrorists and religious extremism.

The chairman of the All Pakistan Ulema Council, Maulana Tahir-ul-Ashrafi, urged the world community to avoid any interference in the case and promised that Pakistan would provide justice for the girl and the Christian community.

A few Christians have moved back to the neighborhood. Nooran Bashir said she left her house in panic, hours after the Christian girl's arrest.

"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.

On Sunday, she decided to return to their house and spent the night there, along with one of her sons. But her other children were too scared to return with her, so she sent them to stay with relatives.

She said local Muslims asked them not to worship at their church, and if

they do, they were told not to sing songs during the service.

Others are not ready to return. A group of about 200 Christians protested in front of the city administration offices, demanding that they be allowed to stay in the clearing they had created and where they hope to build their church. There was word on whether their wish would be granted.

“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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