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Pakistan reeling from anti-Christian attack

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ISLAMABAD – Pakistan is reeling from a Muslim mob attack that set ablaze almost 200 buildings in a predominantly Christian neighborhood of Lahore, the country's second largest city, on Saturday.

The mob was angered by alleged insults against Islam's Prophet Muhammad.

Many Christians complain that Pakistan's harsh blasphemy laws – with offenses punishable by life in prison or even death – have become a convenient excuse for exercising vigilante justice against them and other religious minorities. Christians make up less than 5 percent of Pakistan's 180 million people; most Pakistanis are Sunni Muslim.

Drunken dispute

The most recent incident was sparked by alleged remarks against Muhammad made by Sawan Masih, a 28-year-old Christian man, to two Muslim friends during a drunken argument.

The following day hundreds of angry Muslims marched through the neighborhood burning about 170 houses, seven shops and two churches. Some residents were injured, but there were no serious casualties.

The Pakistan Interfaith League, a "socio-political organization that works for peace and harmony for all in Pakistan," according to its chairman, Sajid Ishaq, has been tracking the event. They say there are no reliable witnesses to confirm whether the act of blasphemy was committed or not.

"The police knew the night before that something terrible was going to happen," said Ishaq, a 42-year-old Christian. "But they didn't do much about stopping the mob. Rather, they told the community that they should evacuate. Where's the sense in that?"

The lack of timely action from local authorities has left many demanding answers.

"We are totally outraged to learn that these buildings [in the Christian neighborhood] were set ablaze at 9:00 a.m. The firefighting service did not arrive until 3:00 p.m.," said human rights activist Tahira Abdullah. "The blaze was not put out till nightfall... Exploitation of popular sentiment in the name of religion is not new in Pakistan, but it is reaching unprecedented proportions."

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While there were unconfirmed reports that political heavyweights and the local land mafia had orchestrated the attack to evacuate the Christian community from some very valuable real estate in the heart of Lahore, local observers did not count out inept governance as a probable cause.

"There's usually a financial dispute, small or large, when these incidents occur," said Ashar-ur-Rehman, editor for the daily Dawn. "But they [the government] didn't see any need to intervene. They were late. If you don't allow people a sense of security, you are exposing yourself as complicit with perpetrators of the crime."

'We want justice'

On Sunday, retaliatory riots by Christians engulfed Lahore and other Pakistani cities.

But some are trying to get justice in other ways.

"There were about 400 to 500 bibles burnt in the attack. The mob humiliated our holy scriptures and churches," said Ishaq of the Pakistan Interfaith League. "So we are asking that the culprits should be booked under the same blasphemy law that they allege we Christians broke."

The Supreme Court has taken notice of the incident, and hearings are underway investigating the inaction of the administration, which has announced \$2,000 as compensation for each

family

But according to the Pakistan Interfaith League, each family has suffered an average loss of around \$20,000 for their property.

"Our community is rejecting this token. We don't want charity. We want rights. We want justice," said Ishaq. 

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