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Pakistan's Anti-Blasphemy Laws Applied to Muslim-Hindu Clashes

October 01, 2012 1:48 PM

By Sharon Behn

ISLAMABAD — Pakistan's Hindu minority is using the country's controversial anti-blasphemy laws against a group of Muslims that attacked a Hindu temple.

Anti-blasphemy laws here have typically been used against religious minorities. Now, police are applying the same regulations to charge nine Muslims, including a cleric, of rampaging through a temple and destroying Hindu religious items. Some laws carry the death penalty.

Hafiz Muhammad Tahir Ashrafi, chairman of the Muslim Pakistan Ulema Council, welcomed the decision.

"I think this is a good gesture from Pakistan, and a good gesture of Muslim people from Pakistan," he said.

The incident took place in Pakistan's southern city of Karachi, during violent riots against a crude American-made anti-Islam film 10 days ago. Police officials said the Sri Krishna Ram temple was vandalized and a copy of the Hindu holy script torn up.

It is one of the rare times that Pakistan's blasphemy laws have been used to charge Muslims. However, as yet none of the accused has been found and arrested. The laws date from the British colonial era, but were broadened under Pakistan rule.

Ashrafi was one of the Muslim leaders who stood up for an under-age Christian girl detained in August by police on a blasphemy charge. She had been accused of burning pages of the Muslim holy book, the Quran.

Young Rimsha Masih, believed to be mentally impaired, was later released on bail.

Sajid Ishaq, the Christian chairman of Pakistan's Interfaith League, welcomed the decision to charge those involved in the Hindu temple case, but says the laws are not

being applied evenly across the country.

He says on the same day that the Hindu temple was ransacked, a church and Bibles in the northwestern town of Mardan were burned. Ishaq says those behind that attack should also be brought to justice, as an example to the nation.

"And make this a case as a test case, so that in future nobody would ever think of burning such holy places and holy books," he said. "Because our prophets our books our holy places are sacred to us - and there is a need that we should respect all prophets, all holy places."

Blasphemy is a sensitive issue in Pakistan, and those who have spoken out against the law have been attacked, and in some cases, assassinated.

Human rights activists have said the overly broad laws have been abused in the past to satisfy personal vendettas.