



Religious Tensions Simmer Across Pakistan following Church Bombings

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Tensions simmered across Pakistan between the Muslim majority and Christians following Sunday's (March 15) deadly gun-and-bomb attacks on two churches and the subsequent killing of two Muslims here.

At least 17 people, including two policemen, have succumbed to their injuries from the suicide attacks in Lahore's Youhanabad area, which targeted Christ Church Youhanabad and St. John's Catholic Church during Sunday Mass. Christians on Monday (March 16) filled roads to protest against the attacks, and one Christian youth was killed and 15 others were wounded in Lahore as violent protests spread from Youhanabad to other parts of the country.

Tensions between Christians and Muslims were such that police had to use tear gas and water cannons to disperse protestors. By evening, the Punjab Home Department had to deploy three companies of paramilitary force, Pakistan Rangers, in the area after a violent standoff between local Muslim and Christian youths from Youhanabad and adjacent localities.

The two Muslims killed were accused of being accomplices of the terrorists and had been handed over to police soon after the bombings. While some local people told Morning Star News that they "had heard that the two suspects were armed with pistols and were firing their weapons at the locals," others said that the men were suicide bombers who intended to target a third church in the area.

Both men were later snatched from police custody, brutally tortured to death and their bodies torched in the middle of the Ferozepur Road. Police have since announced that one of the slain men, local glass-cutter Muhammad Naeem, had no connection with the bombings.

At least two young suicide attackers blew themselves up – one at each church building – just when services were ending. Both attacks were foiled by Christian security volunteers, who confronted the terrorists with bravery and laid down their lives to protect the 2,000 people worshipping at the two churches.

The attacks, which took place almost five minutes apart, killed 16 people, including two policemen deployed for church security on Sunday, and on Monday a wounded Christian died at a hospital, raising the number of dead to 17.

Immediately claiming responsibility for the attacks was the Jamaatul Ahrar, a Taliban terrorist group that had parted ways with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) few months ago and pledged allegiance with the Islamic State (IS, or Dae'sh) but had recently announced rejoining the TTP.

A statement from the group said that they would continue to target non-Muslims until their objectives are achieved.

The Protestant Christ Church was the first to be struck by two suicide bombers, who attempted to storm through the main gate by opening indiscriminate fire on a police constable and some security volunteers of the site. A policeman identified only as Rashid was killed instantly, along with one security volunteer, Yusuf, alias Goga.

The Rev. Irshad Ashknaz of Christ Church told Morning Star News that he was administering Holy Communion at about 11:25 a.m. when gunshots rang outside the main gate.

"Soon afterwards there was a loud explosion, and clouds of dust rose above the street," he said. "By that time we had evacuated members of the congregation from the back door; some 1,000 people were present inside the church at that time."

Ashknaz said that one of the attackers had engaged the security personnel using an assault rifle, while the bomber approached the main gate from the opposite direction.

"We were later informed that a church member, Obaid Khokhar, had grabbed the suicide bomber and was dragging him away from the church gate when the terrorist's accomplice opened fire on him," he said. "The shooter also killed Khokhar's wife, who happened to be accompanying him."

After failing to enter the church gate, the bomber blew himself up, killing himself and at least 13 people, Ashknaz said, crediting the church's security volunteers with putting up life-saving resistance to the assailants.

Five minutes after the first attack, two suicide bombers attempted to storm St. John's Catholic Church, some 500 meters away, but security volunteers at the gate confronted them. There were four police guards deployed for the church's security, but three of them were reportedly watching TV at a shop while one was accompanying the security volunteers.

The Rev. Francis Gulzar of St. John's Church told Morning Star News that a young volunteer named Akash Bashir played a major role in thwarting mass casualties at the church. About 1,000 people were worshipping inside the building at that time, he said.

"One of the attackers came running from one side while firing his gun, while another scaled the church's wall from another side," he said. "Akash rushed towards the attacker and grabbed him, forcing the bomber to detonate his explosives. The young man sacrificed his own life to save us. He's our hero, and his martyrdom will always be remembered."

Police officials said that both bombs weighed about 5-7 kilograms, with each one fitted with ball bearings to cause maximum casualties.

"We found ball bearings and nuts from various parts of the church lawn and building," a senior official of the Punjab Counter-Terrorism Department told Morning Star News. "Even the main gate of the church was destroyed by the impact of the blast."

The official said he had no knowledge of any specific threat against the two churches. He said worship places across the country were designated as high-security zones.

Soon after the bombings, youths from Christian areas came out of the colony and blocked the main road. The protestors pelted cars and Muslim-owned properties with stones and also damaged the main terminal of the transit system. The Christian mob placed the charred bodies of the two Muslims in the middle of the road and did not allow law enforcement agencies to enter the area and remove the bodies for nearly five hours.

The mobs also held the three policemen deployed for the Catholic church's security hostage for three hours and manhandled them for "watching a cricket match instead of performing their official duty." The officers were later released, much to the relief of senior police and district administration officials who had been ordered not to use force against the emotionally charged youths.

The situation was such that even Christian lawmakers belonging to the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government, including Sen. Kamran Michael and Minorities Affairs Minister Khalid Sindhu, were roughed up by the charged crowds

and denied entry into the colony on Sunday and Monday, respectively.

The PML-N has long been seen as soft towards Islamist groups, and most attacks against Christian and other non-Muslim communities in Punjab Province have occurred during the party's rule, causing deep resentment in the community against the party.

Day of Violence

On Monday, thousands of Christians again went onto the roads in Youhanabad and in other cities of the country, including Faisalabad, Gujranwala, Sialkot and Multan, to protest against the incident; they blamed local police for negligence and deliberately deploying few officers in the impoverished Christian colony of about 100,000 people.

Christian educational institutions across Pakistan remained closed on Monday to mourn the lives lost in the attacks.

Hundreds of Christian protestors gathered at Faisalabad's Millat Road, where they burned tires and attacked a rickshaw. The protestors also blocked the Kamalpur Interchange on Faisalabad Motorway, then headed to Zila Council Chowk to continue demonstrations.

Protests have taken place in various parts of Faisalabad since Sunday, while police baton-charged protestors near the Pindi Bypass in Gujranwala. They also took 15 demonstrators into custody.

Tensions increased at Youhanabad after it was revealed that one of the men killed by the crowd was a local glass-cutter who lived in Kasur, some 30 kilometers (19 miles) from Youhanabad, and had come to the Christian colony where his brother owns a shop for the last four years.

Soon Muslim groups came out in relatively smaller numbers to protest against the killing in at least two reported incidents near Lahore. Reports also surfaced of a Christian man being subjected to torture by Muslim protestors in Kasur District, but those could not be independently confirmed.

At Youhanabad, Christian youths fought pitched battles with Muslims of neighboring localities. Both sides pelted each other with stones and bricks and used batons on some occasions. The situation compelled police to use tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowds.

Earlier, a protestor was killed while seven others were injured after being hit by a car during the mayhem outside Youhanabad.

Police sources said Christian protestors stopped a schoolteacher identified only as Mariam near Nishtar Colony, surrounded her car and started breaking the windows. The terrified woman tried to escape and ran the vehicle over demonstrators. The injured were taken to Lahore General Hospital, where doctors pronounced one of them dead. The Christian mobs began torturing the woman, but she was rescued by police and some other Christians.

Rangers deployed in the area amid fears of resumption of clashes between the two religious communities brought the situation under control later in the night.

Pakistan Interfaith League Chairman Sajid Ishaq said it was unfortunate that Christian youths had succumbed to violent retaliation.

"Christianity preaches love and tolerance – while we cannot ignore the lapses in governance and the attitude of the ruling party towards non-Muslims, our youths should have exercised restraint and registered their protest peacefully," he said.

"Killing two innocent people to exact revenge is unacceptable ... this has caused great loss to the entire community."

He added that violence and extremism in all forms and manifestations should be condemned in the strongest terms.

"Our demands to the government are simple," Ishaq said. "They should form a judicial commission to investigate the circumstances of the attacks and make the report public. The government should also announce civil medals and enhanced compensations for the brave Christian volunteers who laid down their lives so that others might live."

He said committees should be formed at the district and tehsil levels to foster inter-faith harmony in cases of persecution and religious tension.

"Such incidents will continue to occur unless the ruling party gives up its policy of patronizing terrorist outfits like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Lashkar-e-Taiba etc.," he said. "Even tragedies like Shantinagar, Gojra, Joseph Colony and the lynching of a poor Christian couple at a brick kiln in Kot Radha Kishan have failed to move the Punjab government. Its indifferent attitude towards minorities is stoking anger within our communities. Monday's violence shows the frustration in our youths, and I fear things might get out of control unless the government leaders show compassion and start treating us like equals."

Condemning the retaliation attacks, Bishop Irfan Jamil of the Anglican Church in Pakistan said that terrorists were targeting all communities irrespective of their faiths.

"Resorting to acts of violence will only lead to more bloodshed," he said. "We have to fight terrorism as one nation, and I urge all Christians to remain peaceful and united in this hour of grief."

Funerals for most of the victims of Sunday's bombings were scheduled for Tuesday (March 17) at 11 a.m. under strict security measures.

Courtesy: Morning Star News

Photo: Christian women mourn a dead relative after church bombings in Lahore.

Photo courtesy: M. Ali

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