

In Pakistan, 13 sentenced over lynching of Christian couple

By Catholic News Agency

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Pakistan, Maulana Abdul Khabir Azad, Imam, (3. from the left) along with several other Muslim religious leaders and Father James Channan OP (2. from the left, Peace Centre in Lahore) is consoling Christians at the lynching of Shama and Shahzad in Kot Radha Kishn. (CNA)

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LAHORE, Pakistan – Five men in Pakistan’s Punjab province were sentenced to death last week for their leading role in the November 2014 murder of a Christian couple. Another eight were given two years in prison for their participation in the lynching.

Judge Chaudhry Muhammad Azam of Lahore’s Anti-Terrorism Court handed down the sentences on November 23. The guilty have also been fined approximately \$1,900 (200,000 Pakistani rupees).

On November 4, 2014, Shahzad Masih and his wife Shama, who was pregnant with the couple's fourth child, **were attacked by a lynch mob** (<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/in-pakistan-dozens-face-murder-charges-for-lynching-of-christian-couple-96160/>) and their bodies burned after they were accused of desecrating the Quran. The couple lived in Kot Radha Kishan, a city located nearly 40 miles southwest of Lahore.

The couple worked at a brick kiln, and it has been reported that the kiln owner noticed Shama – who was illiterate – burning some belongings of her recently-deceased father-in-law, and charged that some pages she burnt were from the Quran – he then detained them. They owed him money, and he refused to release them without being paid.

It was then announced from local mosques that the couple had desecrated the Quran, and a mob forced their way into the room where the Masihis were held, and beat them with bricks and shovels. Reports vary as to whether or not the couple's bodies were thrown into the kiln before or after their deaths.

According to Dawn, a Pakistani English-language daily, the Anti-Terrorism Court heard that the five men given the death penalty “gathered a large mob of hundreds by making announcements over a mosque loudspeaker and incited them to violence with incendiary speech.”

Riaz Anjum, the lawyer representing the Masih family, told AFP that according to the judgement, “the five people awarded the death sentence were involved in dragging, beating and burning the couple while the other eight played a supportive role.”

The chairman of the Pakistan Inter-faith League, Sajid Ishaq, told The News International that the guilty verdict has “revived [Christians'] confidence in the supremacy of judiciary and enhanced their faith in fair and free investigations conducted in this case. I would not say I support the death sentence but I would say that such a decision has become essential to prevent violence in the society amidst prevailing conditions in our country.”

He added that “the crime was so gruesome that it plunged the whole Christian community in a shock.”

“I sincerely hope and wish that the decision by the ATC in ‘Sajjad and Shama’ lynching case will serve as a strong preventive step against any such incident in future. The minority communities of our country will indeed feel reassured and will draw a sense of protection from this decision,” Ishaq concluded.

In total, 103 people had been charged in the lynching case, according to Anjum. But 90, including the owner of the brick kiln, were acquitted.

Pakistan’s state religion is Islam, and around 97 percent of the population is Muslim. The nation has adopted blasphemy laws which impose strict punishment on those who desecrate the Quran or who defame or insult Muhammad.

The blasphemy laws are said to be used often to settle scores or to persecute religious minorities; while non-Muslims constitute only three percent of the Pakistani population, 14 percent of blasphemy cases have been levied against them.

Many of those accused of blasphemy are murdered, and advocates of changing the law are also targeted by violence.