

A Factsheet Prepared by Centre for Social Justice 12/09/2023



A woman looks at the ruins of a home destroyed by mobs during the Aug. 16 attacks in Jaranwala. (Photo: Jamaima Afridi)

# Provided We Learn

## Religion based violence targeting faith-minorities in Punjab

May – September 2023

Incidents of alleged desecration of Quran, etc. in Sargodha, Jaranwala & Tandalianwala - Faisalabad, Khanewal, Rawalpindi, Harappa-Sahiwal.

### Background Information

Abuse of blasphemy laws is a recurring tragedy in Pakistan due to a world unique blasphemy laws and a record number of accused in the world (at least 2329 from 1987 to August 2023).

In the on-going year the abuse has spiked, at least 209 persons had been accused under different provisions of the blasphemy laws till August. Over 80% or 168 accused were Muslims, 18 Ahmadis, Nine Christians and one Hindu. 75% of incidents reported were in Punjab (50%) and Sindh (25%), while remaining were in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

The data compiled by the Centre for Social Justice explains that there is long history of violent attacks on Christians in Pakistan, particularly in Punjab. Between 1997 and 2016, 51 attacks on Christian settlements and churches had been reported, including 15 terrorist attacks and the rest

were attacks by mobs and individuals. As a result, 69 churches were desecrated and over 900 hundreds of houses damaged.<sup>1</sup> At least 138 Christian lost their lives, in addition to 23 Christians killed in connection with blasphemy allegations extra judicially<sup>2</sup> and hundreds of people were injured in these attacks.

Between 2016 and 2023 attacks were reported on Hindu and Ahmadiyya places of worship a number of times in various parts of the country.

A wave of hatred and violence has been observed during the 2023 summer, incidentally as the political parties are bracing to enter the electoral race for the next parliamentary tenure. The incident in Jaranwala got media coverage due to its magnitude, however, the curbs on media and scare among the victims has hindered objective and sufficient reporting of the situation, particularly in Sahiwal, Sargodha and other places. Hence the public opinion is largely uninformed or misinformed about the gravity of the situation.

A one-sided impression is created about the minorities being involved in the blasphemy which is peddled by the extremist outfits. This impression is impacting the social relations among the majority and minority religious communities as well as different Muslim sects. Therefore, this factsheet enumerates basic facts of 13 cases in Punjab to call attention of the administration and public at large. Importantly, besides Christians and Ahmadis, the Shia community has also been targeted using the Section 298 and 298 A against them (Sargodha cases 1, 7 & 8). However, this factsheet endeavours to cover the situation of Christian minority.

## **Sargodha**

Even before Jaranwala, Sargodha city and surrounding villages have witnessed unrest after recurring complaints registered under blasphemy laws since June 30th. The Christian community in particular, has been living in fear for their security and safety. While the Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan and other organizations have been regularly campaigning around the alleged blasphemy holding Christians in suspicion, dozens of Christians were arrested though most have been released after investigation.

Five Christian men (Haroon, Zaki Waris, Zimran George, Kamran George and Akash Karamat) were confirmed as arrested in connection with the following five cases registered. However, the complete number is not known as the illegal detainees in Chak 49, Mariam Town, Chak 37 and Chak 36 were unofficial and people also displaced. The families of the people arrested were afraid to report arrests or engage in litigation while a continuous hatred campaign by the religious outfits created scare.

### **Sargodha Case 1:**

On 11 May 2023, Naeem Abbas, an employee of Tehsil Headquarter Quarter Hospital, Silanwali in district Sargodha was accused of insulting the name of Hazrat Abu Bakar (RA), the first Caliph of Islam, under 295-A & 298-A, PPC. The accused was reportedly arrested.

<sup>1</sup> [https://hrqp-web.org/hrqpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Incident-report\\_Mob-led-destruction-of-churches-in-Jaranwala.pdf](https://hrqp-web.org/hrqpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Incident-report_Mob-led-destruction-of-churches-in-Jaranwala.pdf) (calculated from the Annexures 1 & 2)

<sup>2</sup> [https://csjpak.org/pdf/HR\\_Observer\\_2022.pdf](https://csjpak.org/pdf/HR_Observer_2022.pdf) p. 18.

### **Sargodha Case 2:**

On 30 June 2023, after Friday prayers, about ten Christian households of **Chak 49 Northern** adjacent to Sargodha city, were attacked by, mostly, their neighbors. A Christian named **Haroon Shahzad** was accused of posted a verse of the Bible on his Facebook account which disapproved the animal sacrifice. The attack made Christians resident panic and abandon their homes.

**Haroon Shahzad**, aged 36, a father of four, is a (House) painter by profession. His family of nine members, including his brothers and sisters lived near the village mosque. The complainant, Imran Ullah, also a resident of the village, is also known as Don. Imran reportedly had a personal vendetta with the Haroon Shahzad, which led to false accusations against him.

The FIR #615/23 under section 295-A PPC was filed around 4:25 p.m. at the Cantonment Police Station, Sargodha. The complainant alleged that on 8 June 2023, Haroon Shahzad posted the derogatory content (a verse from the Bible). As of now, the accused is detained, initially he was granted a release on bail which was later revoked by the magistrate. Initially, the police also detained two women and four men from his family.

### **Sargodha Case 3:**

**Zaki Masih** of **Chak 98, Northern** shared a government-initiated public service message against corruption on his Facebook account. The message emphasized the prohibition of corruption according to the teachings of Islam, along with a Quranic verse. However, the FIR did not mention the actual text of post but an interpretation of the shared post which was far apart from the text.

According to the FIR, the complainants warned the accused, Zaki, and asked him to delete the content which, he refused. The police filed an FIR #684/23 under Article 295-A on 8 July 2023, without an investigation.

### **Sargodha Case 4:**

In Green Town, Sargodha is predominantly Muslims settlement, while adjacent **Maryam Town** is populated by mostly Christians. Early in the morning, after the Fajr prayer on 16 July 2023 announcements were made from the mosque urging people to gather and prepare for an attack on Maryam Town. The announcements claimed that some Christian from Maryam Town had displayed a poster that carried offensive remark against Muslims/ Islam.

The news spread and the Christians in Maryam Town fled their homes for safety. Meanwhile, the police were deployed in the locality to control situation and registered an FIR #856/23 under section 295-A PPC against the unknown culprit.

TLP staged a protest, issuing an ultimatum of 48 hours for the arrest of the individuals responsible. The police remained deployed in Maryam Town which remain till date.

### **Sargodha Case 5:**

Sunday, **August 20, 2023**, at **Chak 36**, on Kandiwal Road, near Sargodha city. Some worshippers, while leaving the mosque, discovered a shopping bag filled with torn and burnt

pages of Quran, placed against the wall of the priest's house at the Catholic Church. A note was attached with it that referred to the Jaranwala incident that occurred on August 16, 2023.

The news spread rapidly, and people started gathering in the area, while the Christians panicked and fled their homes. The police controlled the situation and registered FIR # 454/23 under section 295-B, PPC against the unknown culprits.

#### **Sargodha Case 6:**

On **25 August 2023**, in **Chak 37 SB** announcements were made through the mosque's loudspeaker, claiming that the Holy Quran had been burnt and urging people to gather around the mosque. The crowd expressed anger towards the Christians, and residents informed the police. The police controlled the crowd by promising an action. The police registered an FIR #464/23 under section 295-B PPC against the unknown accused.

On Sunday, 27 August, 2023, TLP called upon its supporters from the Sargodha division to stage a protest in Sargodha city, demanding the arrest of the culprits. The police arrested Zimran George (33), the son of George Masih, a teacher and his friend Akash Karamat (17).

#### **Sargodha Case 7:**

On 3 July 2023 police in Moaza Baryana, Sargodha registered An FIR # 314/23 against Azhar Abbas under section 298, 298A, PPC. He was accused of sharing objectionable post on Facebook, disrespecting the third Caliphs of Islam.

#### **Sargodha Case 8:**

Molana Muhammad Nouman registered an FIR # 991/23 on 8 August 2023 against Rana Safeer Hussain and Rana Fasi Haider under section 298, 298A of PPC with the police in Kot Momin, Sargodha, claiming that both accused shared objectionable religious content on their Facebook.

#### **Jaranwala Case 9:**

On 16 August 2023, violent attacks were perpetrated on the Christian community in Jaranwala, Faisalabad District. At about 5 a.m. when a woman in one locality, known as Cinema Basti, alleged that she found some blasphemous material affixed to a gas meter outside the house of two brothers, Raja Masih and Rocky Masih. The news spread around the town, the local leaders of Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), accompanied by several other people, approached the police to register a case against the two accused. The tensions started to grow and announcements were made from different mosques calling on Muslims to gather and take action against the alleged blasphemy. The announcements used abusive language and incited violence against the Christian community. Consequently, a crowd began to gather at the police station and a FIR # 1258/23 was registered against the two accused brothers under section 295-B & 295-C, PPC. After 8:30 the attacks on Christian settlements began in Jaranwala city that engulfed nearby villages where a systematic attacks were carried out.

24 churches,<sup>3</sup> belonging to several Christian denominations, including the Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church, Salvation Army, Church of Pakistan and various Pentecostal and

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<sup>3</sup> Fact Finding report HRCF.

Congregational churches, several pastors' houses and over 80 homes were burnt down. A street, known as 'band gali', was torched. Several adjacent streets were also attacked where Christian households were clearly singled out for attack.

In Essa Nagri, many houses next to the churches were attacked and their contents set on fire, while the boundary wall of the graveyard opposite a church was demolished. A similar attacks occurred in the adjoining villages where places of worship were attacked and damaged.

Thousands of families residing in Jaranwala, and the neighbouring villages, were displaced and became jobless. Their children were out of school and the whole Christian population became a social out-cast in their social context.

#### **Harappa - Sahiwal Case 10:**

On 19 August 2023 an FIR No. 700/23 was registered against Ahsan alias Shan under Section 295-A, 295-B of PPC, and the Prevention of Electronic Crime Act 2016-11. The plaintiff, Amir Farooq filed an application accusing a Christian (TikTok username: ahsanraj275) for displaying in his TikTok a blasphemous letter that caused attack against Christian settlement in Jaranwala. The TLP staged protests which led police to include charge under The Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997 in the FIR against the accused, which basically allows prolonged detentions on suspicions.

#### **Rawalpindi Case 11:**

Griffin Gill (nickname Saghar Mittoo), converted to Islam after a dispute with his Christian brothers over a property from his family, as he was reportedly unable to repay loans from various individuals and a bank.

He filed a complaint at Race Course Police Station, Rawalpindi alleging that his family members desecrated the Holy Quran in Christian Colony, Rawalpindi on 24 August 2023. The SHO forwarded the application to the Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) for further investigation. The ASP required evidence for the allegation, which the complainant failed to produce. However, the community leaders from Muslim and Christian communities helped resolving the matter amicably while police controlled the situation.

#### **Tandalianwala- Faisalabad Case 12:**

On 7 September 2023 an FIR No. 1034/23 was registered against Ms. Najma Bibi under section 211 of PPC and The Punjab Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance, 1960 at police station, Tandalianwala. Complainant, William Gill brought a complaint alleging that she attempted to create religious disharmony when Christian residents asked her to stop supplying narcotics in the locality.

First, she threatened to make the Christian settlement another Jaranwala, then she went on to incite Muslims to take action against the Christians using a fabricated story of desecration of Quran. The local Ahle Sunnat Waljmaat called a meeting and found allegation of blasphemy by Najma Bibi to be false. However, the residents of the Christian Colony Tandalianwala had to relocate temporarily for safety.

### **Khanewal Case 13:**

On **7 September 2023**, at Landhi Basti, Khanewal, Matthew Pius, a 12-year-old student of 5th grade, forgot his book on the table. The following day, the janitor mistakenly discarded a page from the book, someone retrieved it and handed it to his class teacher, Ms. Tayyaba. Matthew's name was written on the page. The teacher beat Matthew and made him apologize.

Next day, local law enforcement, along with relevant agencies, visited Matthew's house to take his statement. Following their investigation, the police concluded that Matthew was innocent however the incident caused scare among the Christian populace and forced the family to relocate.

### **Conclusions:**

- Besides those officially arrested, a number of Christians were unofficially arrested in several of these cases, particularly in Sargodha, Jaranwala and Faisalabad, NGO, Christian True Spirit, got released 34 and CLAAS got six persons released through court interventions from Jaranwala police. A large scale illegal arrests were also made in Sargodha, and Faisalabad, where the people in Jaranwala had taken refuge. Hence, the victims of attacks, false cases of blasphemy were further victimized by the police apparently to appease the so-called religious outfits.
- The illegal detentions included many women and juveniles.
- On 18 August 2023, the IG Punjab Police purported an obsolete narrative that the incidents were a foreign conspiracy and the police had broken the network of culprits, insinuating that the Christian suspects were part of a conspiracy or even guilty. This emboldened the so-called religious parties on one hand and disempowered the victims of violence.
- There is tangible evidence to suggest that the police tried to force their narrative on Christians regarding the incidents rather than keep to their lawful stance of *innocent until proven guilty*. In Sargodha the police and administration compelled prominent Christians to record video messages and upload on their Social Media accounts wherein they praised the administration and their action, supposedly to disassociate themselves from the people arrested by the police.
- In Faisalabad, the police forced the Christian clergy to exhibit poster showing remorse over the desecration of Quran on Sunday. Nonetheless, in the local context usually such statements would tantamount to a confession of a crime.
- The incidents in Jaranwala on 16 August 2023 were a replication of what happened in Shanti Nagar in 1997, Sangla Hill in 2005, and Gojra and Korian in 2009, and numerous other incidents in which mobs gathered, following provocative announcements of alleged acts of blasphemy, usually emanating from mosques or religious groups of majority faith. The failure of the police and administration to stop mob violence-inflicting harm on

members of Christian communities, causing fatalities in some cases, committing arson and looting properties and desecrating churches is also a pattern.

- Hence, the police and administration has, perhaps inadvertently, worked against the social interest and justice and against Christian minority while the police action favoured the politics of involved religious outfits. Therefore, the situation in the abovementioned places specifically and in the Punjab province generally far from satisfactory. The volcano of religion based violence in sheer abuse of law of religion can erupt anytime. Hence it is time for all stakeholders, particularly to put the actions together to control the situation from become worse.
- The Supreme Court of Pakistan has taken a Suo Moto notice of Jaranwala incident and Bishop Azad Marshall, the moderator of Church of Pakistan has approached the Lahore High Court for directing the formation of a judicial Commission of Inquiry over the incident. A judicial oversight may be helpful in addressing the impunity available to police and administration however another judicial inquiry will fail its purpose of justice without a just and fair investigation, moreover the will of the decision makers to punish the culprits and stop actors using the blasphemy law already proven susceptible to abuse and injustice. (END).

