Mob violence and the social ostracisation of the Christian community in Sargodha

An HRCP fact-finding report





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Introduction

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) had been receiving reports about a series of blasphemy-related First Investigation Reports (FIRs) filed against members of the Christian community in certain villages of the Sargodha district since July. This situation then escalated to threats of impending mob violence against the community, leading to their socio-economic ostracisation, displacement of some people and a general sense of insecurity and fear.

According to these reports, the first two FIRs were lodged on 1 July and 8 July 2023 respectively against members of the Christian community for allegedly posting blasphemous content online on two separate occasions (some press reports mention similar incidents occurring even before July). The Maryam Town incident then occurred on 16 July 2023 in which allegedly blasphemous wall-chalking by members of the Christian community triggered angry mobs and created fears of mob violence. Two more FIRs regarding the desecration of the Quran were lodged against unidentified individuals on 20 and 25 August 2023. The entire community was being held liable for alleged crimes committed by certain individuals and receiving threats of mob 'justice'.

Concerns were expressed that a situation akin to the Jaranwala incident² could unfold. On 23 September 2023, HRCP decided to conduct a fact-finding mission to determine the severity of the prevailing circumstances. The mission comprised HRCP council member Sadia Bokhari, former HRCP council member Asif Khan, minorities' rights activist Tariq Mehmood Ghouri, and HRCP staff members Laraib Saeed (as rapporteur) and Adeel Ahmad.

Mission's terms of reference

The mission's terms of reference were to:

- Investigate the prevalent persecution of Christians in Maryam Town and surrounding villages in Sargodha.
- Assess the infringement of their fundamental rights and extent of threat to their physical security.
- Assess the effectiveness of the civil administration and local law enforcement agencies in addressing the situation.
- Investigate the underlying socio-political factors that gave rise to an increase in hostility towards the Christian community.
- Gauge the extent of the Christian community's insecurity and fear, and evaluate the efficacy of the precautionary measures they have adopted.

Fact-finding exercise

Timeline of the recent persecution of the Christian community in Sargodha

1 July 2023: An FIR was lodged against a Christian man, Haroon Shahzad, from Chak 49 for posting a Biblical verse pertaining to animal sacrifice (see Appendix A).

8 July 2023: A similar FIR was lodged in Chak 98 against a Christian man, Zaki Mashi, for allegedly posting blasphemous content on Facebook (see Appendix B).

16 July 2023: Some allegedly blasphemous content was chalked on the wall of Green Town (a predominantly Muslim settlement) and an FIR was lodged against unidentified individuals. However, rumours spread that the culprits were members of the Christian community residing in Maryam Town, a predominantly Christian

¹ X. Jalil. (2023, September 15). Case studies of religion based violence which call the attention of the admin and public. *Voicepk.net*. https://voicepk.net/2023/09/21130/

² A. Hussain. (2023, August 16). Mobs burn Christian churches, homes in Pakistan after blasphemy allegations. *Al Jazeera*. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/16/angry-mobs-burn-christian-churches-in-pakistan-after-blasphemy-allegations



settlement about six kilometres away from Green Town. Announcements were made from mosques across the city, rallying people to gather in Maryam Town to punish the culprits. A mob then gathered in the area and threatened violence, but timely action taken by the local police averted the risk.³

20 August 2023: An FIR was lodged against unidentified individuals for the desecration of the Quran in Chak 36 (see Appendix C).

25 August 2023: An FIR was lodged against unidentified individuals for desecration of the Quran in Chak 37 (see Appendix D). On 27 August 2023, the police arrested two Christian boys, one aged 17, in connection to the case, claiming to have matched their handwriting with that on the note found with the desecrated copy of the Quran.

Overview of the FIR lodged in Chak 49 (northern branch)

On 28 June 2023, which coincided with Eid-ul-Azha, Haroon Shahzad posted a Biblical verse related to animal sacrifice on his Facebook account. An FIR was filed that day against Mr Shahzad under sections 295 and 298 based on the complaint of a Muslim resident of Chak 49, Imran Ullah, and a mob also gathered at the Chak to enact violence. Mr Shahzad fled to Lahore, and later returned to Sargodha to attend his pre-arrest bail hearing on 3 July. Despite securing bail, the police convinced the local community to allow them to detain Mr Shahzad temporarily. However, the detention continued past his second hearing on 11 July, due to which his bail was cancelled. He has not yet been released from police custody.

Meetings at Chak 49 (northern branch)

The mission first met with two Muslim residents at Chak 49, namely a grassroots political activist and a local *imam* who had, reportedly, played a crucial role in preventing mob violence on 28 June. The political worker told the mission that following Mr Shahzad's Facebook post, a man named Imran Ullah, a resident of Chak 49, complained to the police who lodged an FIR against Mr Shahzad. They also told the mission that a frenzied mob had gathered on the day of the incident, with the intention of attacking the homes of Christian residents. However, according to them, the *imam* swiftly diffused the situation by underlining the peaceful nature of Islam and advised people against taking the law into their own hands. The *imam* attributed the filing of the FIR to a misunderstanding of historical context, the Biblical verse being pre-Islamic.

Immediately after arrest of the accused, the *imams* and Christian priests from various parts of Sargodha convened at the Hamid Ali Shah Mosque in Sargodha under the leadership of the chairman of the mosque committee. The priests clarified that the verse in question predates the Quran and strongly condemned its misinterpretation to malign Islam. They inquired whether the Muslim community would be willing to forgive Mr Shahzad if he publicly sought forgiveness, but it was collectively decided to leave the matter to the court for resolution. Both the political worker and the *imam* claimed that no Christian fled from the village following this incident.

The mission then met two Christian locals who applauded the efforts of the police, priests and *imams* for maintaining peace in the village. However, they admitted to feeling insecure and revealed that several families had temporarily left the village after the incident. All these families returned to the village after a few days barring the family of the accused, who are still worried about their safety in the village.

Overview of the FIRs lodged in Chak 36 and 37 (southern branches)

On 20 and 25 August 2023, two more FIRs were lodged against the alleged desecration of the Quran in Chak 36 and 37. As per the FIR registered in Chak 36, the second *para* of the Quran was found desecrated on the doorsteps of the local mosques in an envelope, along with a note stating that this was done to avenge the Jaranwala incident. As per the FIR registered in Chak 37, an *imam* reached out to the police stating that he had found a desecrated copy of the second *para* of the Quran at the doorsteps of the local mosque at 4.10 AM on 25 August 2023. The police and locals later told the mission that, while not mentioned in the FIR, a similar note was found at this incident as well.

While both FIRs were against unidentified individuals, the police apprehended and arrested two possible suspects in connection with both incidents on 27 August 2023. According to a local priest, this incident led to the social ostracisation of the local Christian community.

³ X. Jalil. (2023, September 15). Case studies of religion based violence which call the attention of the admin and public. *Voicepk.net*. https://voicepk.net/2023/09/21130/



Meeting with the local police

The mission met with two officials of the Sargodha police who informed the mission that they had found handwritten notes alongside the desecrated copies of the Quran in both Chak 36 and Chak 37. According to the police, they had matched the handwriting in the notes to the handwriting of two Christian boys who they had arrested, Zimran and the primary accused 17-year-old Akash. They also claimed that they had found CCTV footage depicting the boys purchasing a copy of the Quran. the register from which these boys had torn pages to write the notes, as well as the pen used to write the notes. However, they acknowledged that they were awaiting the results of an official forensic report from the Punjab Forensic Science Authority for further confirmation. Regarding the Chak 49 case, the police officials agreed that what Mr Shahzad did was not disrespectful towards Islam. Nonetheless, it hurt Muslim sentiments and the police had to invoke Article 295 A in response to the complaint by Imran Ullah.

The police officials stated that the protest by the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) played a significant role in escalating the likelihood of violence in the Maryam Town incident on 16 July 2023. This observation was based on the fact that the two incidents at Chak 36 and 37, in which the TLP was not involved, had been resolved amicably. They also stated that the local *imam* at Chak 37 had attempted to agitate the masses by delivering incendiary sermons on two consecutive Fridays. Fortunately, they said, the police intervened and there were no further attempts to incite mobs.

The officials explained that in cases of a religious nature, their primary approach was to seek amicable resolution through mediation, and lodging FIRs as their last option. They added that lodging FIRs of a religious nature was not limited to Christians only. In Muharram, for instance, eight to ten FIRs were lodged on average against Shia Muslims across Sargodha for allegedly hurting the sentiments of Sunni Muslims.

When asked about their efforts to de-escalate such situations, the police informed the mission that they had held a joint conference with religious leaders from both communities in Sargodha after the Maryam Town incident, and visited mosques to warn people against inciting violence. Moreover, the police claimed to have augmented the security around churches with additional patrolling on Sundays and an enhanced intelligence network. A Meesaq Centre⁴ has also been instituted inside the Tahafuz Markaz building near the Superintendent of Police's office at the police lines after the Jaranwala incident, with a special focus on redressing complaints from the Christian community. They claimed to have received directives from the Inspector General of Police's office against the use of the word 'minority', and that, as per intelligence reports, there was no imminent threat of violence.

The mission also met with the Superintendent of Police who claimed to have everything under control. He praised the local communities for living harmoniously for decades despite religious differences, and stated that, regarding the incidents at Chak 36 and 37, initial meetings with stakeholders were held at local churches where the priests denounced the accused's actions and even displayed condemnatory banners outside their churches. When asked whether there were any direct connections between the recent incidents in Sargodha and the Jaranwala incident, he claimed to have found no direct links.

Meeting with the local administration

The mission held a joint meeting with the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of Sargodha, who pointed at the region being volatile owing to its proximity to Chenab Nagar and a significant presence of one religious group. Prior to the recent wave of violence against Christians, minarets of an Ahmadiyya place of worship in Bhera, district Sargodha were desecrated by the TLP. The TLP had approached the local administration after the incidents at Chak 36 and 37 in a bid to influence the investigation against the accused, but the local administration had been successful in dispersing the mob.

In response to another question, they indicated that lodging FIRs in such cases are, in fact, a means to pacify the situation and control extremist factions. The local administration acknowledged that the situation did take a turn for the worse after arresting Zimran and Akash for allegedly desecrating the Quran at Chak 37. In fact, a mob had gathered with the intention to set the homes of the boys ablaze, but swift police action later controlled the

⁴ Meesaq Centres ensuring rights, inter-faith harmony. (2023, August 30). Punjab Police. https://punjabpolice.gov.pk/node/14314



situation. The local administration seemed clueless when the mission asked whether the Christian community in Chak 37 faced any social ostracisation afterwards; however, they assured the mission that they would look into it.

They said that the local administration had held interfaith harmony meetings and a conference with religious leaders from across the Sargodha division in which Maulana Tahir Mehmood Ashrafi, the chairperson of the Pakistan Ulema Council, had preached interfaith harmony. They also claimed to have engaged people across all sects and religions to continuously monitor the situation in case any timely action would be needed. Moreover, they stated that police patrolling has also been enhanced to ensure the safety of the Christian community.

Meeting with members of the local Christian community

Toward the end of the mission, the team had an hour-long meeting with Stephen and Joseph*, two members of the Christian community who had closely been following the incidents. They applauded the local civil bureaucracy and village *nambardar* for initially controlling the situation at Chak 36. However, they expressed concerns over social unrest in Chak 36 and 37, particularly in Chak 37 where the *imam* had used the mosque pulpit to announce the socio-economic 'boycott' of Christians following the arrest of Zimran and Akash, warning Muslim residents against socially interacting with them or purchasing any of their goods and services. According to them, while some members of the Muslim community privately supported the Christian community, they became hesitant to do so publicly. 'Some instigators had suggested to members of the Christian community to burn down the houses of Zimran and Akash in order to reconcile with the Muslim community. The TLP had also held a procession to agitate mobs when the two boys were arrested; however, their efforts to incite mob violence had been thwarted by the administration's intervention,' they said.

The mission was also told that some troublemakers had displayed posters of Akash, labelling him a blasphemer, and also disseminated messages on social media featuring images of Akash's brothers, Suleman and Zeeshan, 'falsely accusing them of blasphemy even though neither of them resides in Sargodha'. Furthermore, the mission was informed that local authorities were trying to paint Zimran as an Indian agent, alleging that the boy had contacted an Indian citizen during a short stay in Dubai when Zimran had actually been pursuing jobs in Dubai when he came in contact with the Indian person. Both Stephen and Joseph questioned the veracity of the claims made against the accused by stating that the copy of the desecrated Quran in Chak 37 had a red cover while the one allegedly bought by Zimran and Akash had a green cover. The CCTV footage also seemed suspect as it showed Akash buying a copy of the Quran on 23 August from a shop in Chak 42, while the desecration of the Quran had already occurred in Chak 36 on 20 August 2023, rendering the suspects' connection to both cases dubious, they added.

They contended that due process was not followed while filing the FIRs, implicating the accused without a formal inquiry. According to them, the court had approved Mr Shahzad's pre-arrest bail on 3 July 2023, but the police had then met with members of the Christian community at the district police office and requested temporary custody of Mr Shahzad to pacify the situation, only to breach their trust by detaining him for longer than agreed and failing to produce him before the court for his first post-arrest bail hearing. This led to the cancellation of his bail request, and he was now in custody for three months till date.

Stephen, also a lawyer, told the mission that the Christian community lacked confidence in the judiciary to uphold their rights. Initially, some members of the bar council aligned with TLP and also a part of the Khatam-e-Nabuwat Forum, had harassed the lawyers of their [Christian] community. Consequently, lawyers of both communities had a meeting in which they reached an agreement that what Mr Shahzad had done was not blasphemous as he had only posted a verse from the Bible. However, to the community's dismay, in Haroon Shahzad's latest hearing which occurred on the day of the mission, 23 September 2023, the bar's chairperson and secretary appeared against the accused which led to another rejection of his appeal to bail. Stephen also called attention to the judge's discrimination by drawing parallels with another judgment of the Sargodha court in which a Muslim man had been charged under section 295 A. The court had quashed this FIR for failing to follow due process.

Stephen and Joseph accused Imran Ullah, who had lodged the FIR in Chak 49, of having a dubious character, alleging that he was a notorious criminal involved in the unlawful trade of drugs and a video scandal involving a Christian girl.

They also expressed a sense of insecurity, claiming that members of their community had been abducted by plain-clothed persons and gone missing for as long as 30 days. They highlighted that, given the recent wave of anti-Christian sentiment in the country, Christians generally feel unsafe across Pakistan.



They informed the mission that initially many families, particularly female family members, had relocated from Chak 36 and 37, with some returning to Chak 36 but a majority of them choosing to not return. According to Stephen, approximately 50 Christians have relocated permanently from Chak 37. The nuns who ran missionary schools in these villages had also fled for fear of their safety.

When asked about the way forward, they emphasised that the entire community should not be implicated for individual actions, and the trial of accused individuals should be conducted fairly in court instead of resorting to mob justice. They expressed concerns over the breach of harmony that had existed for centuries between the two communities, and underscored the need for targeted efforts for reconciliation. Moreover, they called for amendments to the blasphemy laws to put an end to their misuse.

* Names changed to ensure anonymity

Conclusion

The mission is deeply concerned about the pervasive sense of insecurity within the Christian community in Sargodha, apparent in the relocation of families from specific villages. There is also a prevailing sense of distrust within the community toward both the administration and judiciary owing to perceived deviations from due process. The recent illegal abductions have compounded the community's anxieties and heightened their overall sense of insecurity. Moreover, the socio-economic apartheid imposed on the community in certain areas has only added to their marginalisation.

The mission also has apprehensions about the role of social media in perpetuating hatred towards religious minorities.

While the mission is satisfied with how the local administration and community de-escalated the situation and prevented violence, these events have caused serious rifts in the region's social fabric and disrupted its long-established interfaith harmony, creating a lasting threat of conflict and faith-based violence.

Recommendations

The mission would like to make the following recommendations:

- 1. The state must devise a comprehensive national-level strategy to identify and penalise extremist elements involved in inciting mob violence and hatred against religious minorities. Entire communities must also not be punished for alleged crimes committed by individuals.
- 2. The blasphemy laws must be amended in order to prevent its misuse as well as penalise those making false accusations.
- 3. Those participating in mob violence must also face repercussions for attempting to take the law into their own hands and instilling fear among the vulnerable.
- 4. Law enforcement authorities must receive adequate training on the blasphemy laws, particularly those at the district level, to enable them to discern and filter out complaints that do not fall within the purview of these laws. They must be sensitised on inter-faith harmony and trained in handling mobs and preventing mob violence.
- 5. Claims of deviation from due process while lodging FIRs and making arrests, including keeping people in illegal custody, must also be investigated, with the perpetrators held strictly to account
- 6. The Federal Investigative Agency must hold those involved in perpetuating hate speech against religious minorities online accountable, whether the content targets those accused of committing blasphemy or those related to the accused.
- 7. The state must take action and finally implement the directives of the 2014 Supreme Court judgment, handed down by Justice Tassaduq Jillani, to curb violence against religious minorities and uphold their rights to bring about lasting change.
- 8. The government must ensure the economic welfare and safety of families who have relocated for fear of religious persecution, as well as those facing ostracisation in their own villages.



Appendix A:



غ ليس قارم فير 24-5 (1)

ير لي المر: SGD-CNT-004872

ابتدائی اظاعی دیورث نسیت جرم قائل وست اندازی به لیس دیورث شده در وفعد 154 مجود شایل فویداری

<u>: 615/23</u> تعاند: كينك على: سركودها الكاقيك فمبر: 4281-2023		Cantt-6/3	<u>تاري دوت وقيم: 28.06.2023</u>	
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> طاہر محود SI 30-06-2023



Appendix B:

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ومعظ: سيدفداحسين شاه

> سيد فداحسين شاه SI 08-07-2023

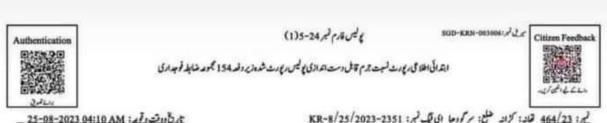


Appendix C:





Appendix D:



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و على المراق ال

الدراشد في ASI 25-08-2023

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