

# **Faith-based murder of Ahmadiyya man in Hasilpur, Punjab**

*An HRCP fact-finding report*



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan



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## Introduction

On 4 March 2024, Tahir Iqbal, a 54-year-old man from the Ahmadiyya community, was shot dead by two unidentified assailants in Hasilpur tehsil, Bahawalpur district. The murder was initially reported in the press as a possible ‘honour’ killing, based on the district police officer (DPO)’s claim that the victim, a landlord, was in a relationship with a woman whose relatives had warned him to end the association.<sup>1</sup>

Given the situation of the beleaguered Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan, which is especially vulnerable to faith-based violence, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) deemed it necessary to investigate the veracity of this claim. HRCP’s regional office in Multan organized a fact-finding mission to Hasilpur on 11 March 2024, comprising Nazir Ahmed, Khawaja Asadullah (HRCP members), Faisal Mahmood (staff member), and Lubna Nadeem (HRCP Council member). The mission’s objectives were to (a) ascertain the likely motive for the murder and (b) establish the facts on the ground.

## Incident report

At about 6.30 AM on 4 March 2024, Tahir Iqbal, a resident of Chak No. 84 in Hasilpur tehsil, Bahawalpur district, was shot dead during his morning walk by two unidentified assailants riding a motorcycle. His body was discovered on a road, at some distance away from his house, by Tanveer Shahid\*, a local resident who was escorting his children to school at the time. Farooq Khan\*, the victim’s cousin, received word of the incident at about 7 AM. On arriving at the scene, he found Iqbal’s body with fatal gunshot wounds to the neck. Another resident, Mohsin\* (subsequently summoned as a witness), also arrived on hearing the news and notified the local authorities. The body was transported to the tehsil headquarter hospital in Hasilpur for post-mortem examination.



*Site where victim’s body was discovered*

Meanwhile, the police collected evidence from the crime scene, including blood-stained soil samples and bullet casings, as well as CCTV footage from nearby shops indicating the direction in which the assailants had fled. The subsequent investigation led to the registration of a murder case against unidentified individuals (FIR No. 23/143 under Criminal Code sections 34/302), with Farooq Khan as the plaintiff.

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<sup>1</sup> I. Gabol. (2024, March 4). Ahmadi leader shot dead by unknown assailants in Bahawalpur: police. *Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1819133>

Subsequently, the DPO for Bahawalpur, Syed Muhammad Abbas, constituted an investigation team and, based on its findings, arrested two young men, Adeel Azeem and Zain Irshad, local youth on 13 March 2024.

## The mission's findings

### *Meetings with local community members*

Farooq Khan, the plaintiff, informed the team that Chak No. 84 was home to approximately 200 households, ten of which belonged to the Ahmadiyya community, which engaged in agriculture on a seven-square-meter piece of land allocated to their forebears. Despite having lived peacefully with their neighbours for many years, recent events had instilled fear and uncertainty within the community.

Ashraf Rehman\*, a teacher at the local Ahmadiyya worship site, shared concerns of escalating hostility towards the Ahmadiyya community. He recalled several incidents of violence targeting Ahmadiyya sites of worship in neighbouring areas. Importantly, he told the mission that a recent inflammatory speech by a local cleric named Maulvi Razzak had fuelled animosity towards Ahmadis in the village, straining relations between the two communities. Despite submitting a written request to the police in Bahawalpur to take notice of the cleric's hate speech and incitement to anti-Ahmadi violence, said Rehman, no action had been taken against the cleric. The mission was also concerned to learn that, when asked about the progress of the investigation, the station house officer (SHO) had reportedly cautioned the Ahmadiyya community against attributing Iqbal's murder to religious animosity, emphasizing that such assertions would impede the investigation.



*The local Ahmadiyya place of worship*

The president of the Ahmadiyya Jamaat in Bahawalpur, Raza Sohail\*, told the mission that the DPO had assured him that the investigation team would pursue any religious motives for the murder, but expressed disappointment that no action had been taken against the cleric.

Waqar Haider\*, an Ahmadi cleric, claimed that the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a far-right political party, had been organizing meetings in Bahawalpur for the past three months, at which speakers incited violence and hate against the Ahmadiyya community, branding them as 'obligatory targets'. Despite a police presence at these gatherings, no action had been taken against instances of hate speech. This hostile environment, said Haider, had left Ahmadis feeling imprisoned in their own homes, afraid to venture out after sunset. Yet, the community's ties to their ancestral land meant they were reluctant to leave the area. Haider unequivocally attributed Tahir Iqbal's murder to Maulvi Razzak's inflammatory rhetoric.

Jamal Ahmad\*, a Sunni Muslim with longstanding ties to the deceased, told HRCP that he had also noticed an adverse shift in local attitudes towards the Ahmadiyya Jamaat. He said that prior to the current divisions and hostilities, attributable allegedly to Maulvi Razzak's sermons, the community's residents had lived together in such harmony that half of the graves in the local cemetery had been allotted to Ahmadi burials and half to other residents' burials, reflecting the sense of unity within the community.



*Meeting with the family of the deceased*

Following Tahir Iqbal's murder, the local *numberdar* [land revenue officer for the village], Ejaz Salman\*, had rallied residents to stand united against such incidents, acknowledging that the Ahmadiyya community and other residents had co-existed peacefully for decades.

#### *Meeting with law enforcement authorities*

After inspecting the crime scene, the HRCP team proceeded to the Saddar police station to speak to the SHO and investigating officer. However, both were attending to other duties and were not available for interview. Subsequently, the team attempted to meet the DPO Bahawalpur, but was informed that he was unavailable. Muhammad Umar, the DPO's PRO, told HRCP that the DPO had requested a report from the SP's investigation, to be shared with the mission the following day.

The mission eventually spoke to the DPO Bahawalpur on 14 March, who told them that two young men, Adeel Azeem and Zain Irshad, had been arrested on charges of murder and had allegedly confessed to killing Tahir Iqbal because killing any Ahmadi person was 'a shortcut to Paradise', as per a *fatwa* [Islamic legal ruling or declaration] issued by Maulvi Razzak.

#### **Mission observations and recommendations**

The mission was concerned to learn that the SHO had advised the victims' heirs against attributing the incident to faith-based violence. Given the circumstances, the police should not have discounted this factor at the outset, especially given that the two men they eventually arrested allegedly confessed to the murder as an act of faith-based violence.

The mission also observed that Maulvi Razzak's inflammatory rhetoric appeared to have increased local residents' hostility towards the Ahmadi community. The authorities' lack of action against Maulvi Razzak for inciting hate and violence is also cause for concern, despite the police being present at the gathering in question and it being brought to their notice by the Ahmadi community.

In light of these findings, the mission has made the following recommendations:

1. The investigation into Tahir Iqbal's murder must be conducted transparently and impartially, and every effort made to provide the prosecution with concrete forensic evidence to build a strong case against the accused.
2. The police must demonstrate within the bounds of the law that perpetrators of faith-based violence are not accorded any impunity.
3. The authorities must take swift and decisive action against the cleric responsible for inciting violence and hate against the Ahmadiyya community. They must also monitor similar public gatherings in the future and take prompt action where necessary.
4. The authorities should create a mechanism for providing social, legal and moral support to Ahmadis facing discrimination or violence.

\* Names changed to ensure anonymity