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Pakistan: Killing of Ahmadis must not go unpunished

Amnesty International fears that once again attacks on the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan will go uninvestigated and unpunished leading to the impression that such violence is condoned by the authorities.

On 30 October, five members of the Ahmadiyya community were killed by several unidentified gunmen as they left their mosque after early morning prayers in Ghatialian village, near Sialkot, Punjab province. Among the victims was a 16 year-old boy. Ten others were injured. To Amnesty International's knowledge, no one has been arrested in connection with the attack.

The killing on 30 October was preceded by tension in the village over religious issues. In 1999, a truce had been reached between Ahmadis and non-Ahmadis but Islamist groups had continued to instigate random violence. The local authorities reportedly took no action to halt intermittent attacks on Ahmadis.

Ahmadis are considered heretical by orthodox Muslims in Pakistan. The Ahmadiyya community was declared non-Muslim in 1974 and a number of laws were subsequently passed which makes it a criminal offence for Ahmadis to profess, practice and preach their faith. Dozens of Ahmadis have been charged under religious sections of the Pakistan Penal Code. In Sialkot district alone, criminal cases based on religion were brought against 23 Ahmadis in the current year. Some 20 Ahmadis have been killed over the last seven years by those who oppose their faith.

Religious organizations advocating violence against Ahmadis are permitted to function openly. Vernacular media spreading the message

of hate and violence of such organizations are not restrained by the authorities.

Amnesty International has consistently appealed to successive governments of Pakistan to abolish relevant laws which criminalize acts constituting the exercise of the right to freedom of religion; to protect Ahmadis against attacks; and to ensure that killings of Ahmadis are investigated and the perpetrators punished.

"If the government consistently fails to investigate attacks and killings of members of religious minorities, the impression will be created that taking the law into one's hands and killing is acceptable behaviour. The Government of Pakistan must publicly condemn such abuse and ensure that all steps are taken to restore the trust of minorities that they are safe in Pakistan," Amnesty International said.

"Chief Executive Pervez Musharraf said in October 1999 that the protection of minorities was a priority for his government. Now is the time to prove that these were not empty words."

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