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Pakistan: Police inaction encourages climate of religious intolerance

Amnesty International today urged the Pakistani authorities to bring to justice the local religious leader who ordered the stoning to death of a mentally ill man in Punjab province last Thursday and all those who participated in the killing.

Zahid Mahmood Akhtar, 48, was stoned to death by hundreds of villagers after the cleric used a loud hailer to issue a *fatwa*, a religious decree, ordering his execution. The mentally disturbed man had claimed to be the "last prophet of Islam".

Detained in 1994 on charges of blasphemy, Zahid Mahmood Akhtar was released three years later on the grounds that he was mentally ill. He had been living since his release with a brother in another city of Punjab province. However when he returned to his village last week, Chak Jumra, a tribal village council, which included the local cleric, sought to expel him. When he stayed on, villagers reportedly complained to the cleric who issued the call to kill him.

Although police have said they will investigate the incident and have arrested several people, there is a history of impunity. On 21 April 1994, a Muslim practitioner of indigenous medicine, Hafiz Farooq Sajjad, was stoned to death by an angry mob in Gujranwala, Punjab province, after the rumour that he had blasphemed was spread by a cleric from the mosque. Despite police promises to investigate, no one has been held to account. Sectarian killings of members of religious minorities, including Shia, Ahmadis and Christians often go unpunished.

"The police continually fail to protect the vulnerable. Their inaction encourages a climate of intolerance which allows people to incite and carry out human rights abuses such as this killing and the gang rape case in the same province highlighted last week," Amnesty International said.

"Pakistan's blasphemy law is frequently misused. The authorities need to review the law and send a strong message that it is not for the people to decide who has blasphemed and how they should be punished."

President Pervez Musharraf said in April 2000 that procedural changes would be introduced to lessen the possibility of abuse of the blasphemy law. However the amendment was withdrawn in May on the grounds that the *ulema* [Islamic scholars] and the people had 'unanimously' demanded it.

Background

The blasphemy law contained in section 295C of the Pakistan Penal Code proscribes the mandatory death penalty for anyone found to have "by words ... or visible representation ... or by any imputation,

innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiled the name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad". It neither defines the terms used such as 'defilement' nor looks into the criminal intent of the alleged offender.

The law has frequently been abused to imprison people on grounds of religious enmity but also has proved an easy tool to have people imprisoned when the real motives are business rivalry or land issues.

Local human rights groups, minority rights organizations and Amnesty International have called for the introduction of procedural safeguards to protect against abuse.

Public Document

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