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Pakistan: Persecution of Ahmadis continues

The Pakistani authorities' refusal to allow members of the Ahmadiyya community to celebrate their annual religious convention in Punjab clearly demonstrates the government's lack of commitment to eliminating persecution against this religious group, Amnesty International said today as Ahmadis gather in London for celebrations this weekend.

"While the new Government of Pakistan has stated its concern about escalating sectarian violence in the country -- which has already claimed more than 100 lives in the first six months of 1997 in Punjab province alone -- it has paid no attention to the continued persecution of the Ahmadis," the organization said.

"The government should immediately and unconditionally release any Ahmadi currently imprisoned solely for practising their religion and abolish all laws which make it a criminal offence for Ahmadis to profess, practice and propagate their faith."

Some estimated 10 million Ahmadis the world over consider themselves Muslim, while orthodox Muslims in Pakistan regard them as heretic on account of doctrinal differences. In 1974 they were declared non-Muslim.

Since the promulgation of an ordinance in 1984, it is a criminal offence in Pakistan for Ahmadis to call themselves Muslim, to use Muslim practices of worship, Muslim terms of greeting or to propagate their faith. In practice it means that Ahmadis can be -- and are -- imprisoned for calling their place of worship a "mosque", or for using the popular greeting "*assalam-o-alaikum*". Section 295-C, added in 1986 to the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), decrees that anyone guilty of defiling the name of the Prophet Mohammad is to be punished with death.

Ahmadis charged with religious offences often find it difficult to obtain bail. Riaz Ahmed, a village headman, his son and two nephews from Piplan village, Mianwali district, have been detained since their arrest in November 1993. Their bail application was turned down by the sessions court, then the Lahore High Court, and has been pending without being heard in the Supreme Court since 1994. Their trial has not yet begun. They have been charged with blasphemy, for allegedly claiming that the founder of their faith was a prophet and had worked miracles.

Though most are free on bail, more than 2,000 Ahmadis have various criminal charges relating to their religious activities pending against them, making it necessary for them to attend court hearings which cost money, time and nervous tension. In 1996, 14 Ahmadis were charged with blasphemy under a law which carried the mandatory death penalty, raising the total number of Ahmadis so charged to 152. No Ahmadi has been executed but many spend long years in prison or pre-trial detention.

Even when bail is granted, Ahmadi prisoners are sometimes not released. Two goldsmiths from Pattoki, Punjab province, Bashir-ul-Haq and his nephew, Mobasher Javed, were arrested on 25 June on charges of having displayed in their shop -- and thereby supposedly defiled -- the words "*There is no God except Allah and Mohammad is his prophet*" and to have preached their faith. On 4 July, a magistrate in Pattoki granted them bail on the ground that the case required further inquiry. However, local Islamists protested against the Ahmadi's release and on 11 July their bail was cancelled. A renewed bail application will be heard on 4 August in the Lahore High Court. Meanwhile the two men whom Amnesty International considers prisoners of conscience, remain imprisoned in district jail Qasur.

"The discriminatory laws against the Ahmadi's and the severity of the punishments involved have contributed to an atmosphere in which Islamists have considered themselves entitled to take the law into their own hands," Amnesty International said.

Some 34 Ahmadi's have been killed between 1984 and 1996 in Pakistan, sometimes in the presence of police who have stood by passively without making any attempt to protect the victims. None of these killings have been adequately investigated by police and there have been no arrests of suspected murderers.

The latest such targeted killing took place on 19 June 1997 in Vihari, Punjab, when Ateeq Ahmad Bajwah -- an Ahmadi lawyer and local leader of the Ahmadiyya community -- and his driver were shot dead in broad daylight. To Amnesty International's knowledge, the police have not investigated the killing and no one has yet been arrested.

"It is imperative that the Government of Pakistan ensures that citizens at risk are adequately protected and that inquiries into attacks and killings of members of minority religious groups are investigated with a view to bringing perpetrators of abuses to justice," Amnesty International said.

Background

Following national and international outcry against the death sentence of a Christian boy, Salamat Masih in February 1995, the Government of Pakistan expressed some concern about the abuse of the blasphemy law under section 295-C of the PPC. In fact, in some cases the state has added charges under section 295-C to other criminal charges against Ahmadi's -- sometimes against the explicit direction of the judiciary.

Dr Akhtar Majoka, arrested in 1994 in district Khushab for allegedly preaching his faith and inviting neighbours to listen to broadcasts of the community's religious head, was initially charged under section 298-C of the PPC -- the criminal offence of posing as a Muslim which can be punished with up to three years' imprisonment. The complainants subsequently applied to police that section 295-C be added to the complaint which both the lower court in Khushab and the Lahore High Court rejected as unrelated to the alleged offence. In March 1997, the charges under both sections of the PPC were formally framed against Dr Majoka, and the trial has now begun.

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