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Pakistan: Failure to protect Shi'a Muslims leaves many at risk

On Tuesday, 26 Shi'a pilgrims on their way to Iran were lined up in front of their bus and shot dead in Mastung, Balochistan. Another three people were killed as they tried to bring victims of this attack to a hospital in Quetta, the provincial capital. Lashkar-e Jhangvi, an anti-Shi'a extremist group, claimed responsibility for the killings.

“Attacks such as these have occurred countrywide this year and have increased in Balochistan. These are not random killings but demonstrate the deliberate targeting of the Shi'a by armed groups,” said Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific director Sam Zarifi.

“Armed clashes between Sunni and Shi'a militant groups have regularly occurred in the past decades, but recent attacks have predominantly targeted unarmed Shi'a Muslims in their homes, shops or while travelling, and even in their places of worship,” said Sam Zarifi.

“Alarming, an increasing number have been Shi'a pilgrims, like yesterday's victims. These attacks prove that without an urgent and comprehensive government response, no place is safe for the Shi'a.” Sam Zarifi said.

“The Muslim holy month of Moharram, which starts at the end of November, is particularly significant for Shi'as and the potential for sectarian violence and targeting of Shi'as is very high. Pakistani authorities must ensure they are prepared to protect all their citizens regardless of religious affiliation.”

This year, Amnesty International has recorded details of at least 15 attacks specifically targeting Shi'a Muslim across the country, from Quetta in the west and Khurram tribal agency on the north-west border with Afghanistan, to the heartland province of Punjab and the city of Karachi in the south.

“Successive governments have failed to address the increasingly explicit threats faced by Shi'a Muslims from groups like Lashkar-e Jhangvi, operating openly in the Punjab and Karachi and apparently striking their victims at will in Balochistan and other parts of the country.”

“For too long the Pakistan government and its security forces have abdicated their responsibility to defend everyone in the society from this deadly form of discrimination.”

“Continued failure to address sectarian violence will only exacerbate the general breakdown in law and order in Pakistan. Only urgent steps to protect the rights of all people and bring the perpetrators to justice in fair trials consistent with international standards will stem the slide.”