

PAKISTANAftab Ahmed, Imtiaz Hussain, Qazi Sarwar, Waijul Hasan, Munwarul Hasan, Mahmood Afridi, Javed Nazir, and others connected with the *Frontier Post*

Journalists and other staff of the *Frontier Post* newspaper in Peshawar have been charged with blasphemy. If convicted they face a mandatory death sentence. Amnesty International also fears that a public outcry against a letter published in the paper could lead to widespread violence, particularly against people associated with the paper.

The *Frontier Post* is the only English language daily newspaper in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan. Aftab Ahmed, news editor; Imtiaz Hussain, chief reporter; Qazi Sarwar, columnist; Waijul Hasan, computer operator; and Munwarul Hasan, in charge of the editorial pages, have been arrested and charged under section 295C of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC). The police are looking for Mahmood Afridi, managing editor, and Javed Nazir, co-editor. Section 295C of the PPC, which covers blasphemy, carries a mandatory death penalty for anyone convicted.

On 29 January 2001 the newspaper printed a letter entitled "Why Muslims hate Jews". The letter had been sent to the editor from an unidentified author by email. The letter contained material described by both the district administration in Peshawar and Mahmood Afridi, the newspaper's managing editor, as "blasphemous". Mahmood Afridi has apologised publicly for the publication stating that it was not deliberate but part of a conspiracy to close the newspaper.

Later on 29 January, the district administration in Peshawar ordered the indefinite closure of the *Frontier Post*, and a magistrate sealed the office of the *Frontier Post* and *Maidan*, an Urdu daily owned by the same company, and its printing press.

Despite public assurances by the province's home department that the premises of the newspaper had been secured, on the day following publication several hundred members of a violent Islamist mob broke open the iron gates of the building housing the printing press, stormed the building and set fire to newsprint and machinery. According to eye-witnesses, police were present throughout but did not intervene as the building was gutted. Meanwhile over 3,000 students gathered at Peshawar University demanding the death of the newspaper's owner. Another group, some of whom were arrested, attacked shops and shouted slogans on the way to the provincial governor's official residence.

Family members of those accused and other members of the paper's staff have expressed fear for their safety and some have gone into hiding. Amnesty International is calling for protection of all those connected with the *Frontier Post*, particularly those accused in the case, and for a full and impartial inquiry into the allegations of blasphemy.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Religiously motivated violence in Pakistan has already cost dozens of lives this year alone.

Mahmood Afridi, who was not in Peshawar on 29 January and has not yet turned himself in to police, acknowledged that the material was "highly blasphemous"

and said that the administration and staff of the *Frontier Post* "identified with the injured feelings of the nation" and offered an "unqualified apology over the occurrence, gross beyond measure and precedent". The public apology was carried on the front page of other newspapers. He also stated that the letter's publication was part of a conspiracy against the paper. He said, "We bluntly claim that the conspiracy sought to close down the *Frontier Post*, rendering the employees jobless and to destabilize Pakistan." Afridi told Reuters news agency that he had brought a complaint against two staff members, who were suspended, who may have conspired to have the letter printed. Afridi urged the authorities to institute a judicial inquiry to ascertain how the letter could have been published.

Other observers have pointed out that the *Frontier Post* has been targeted for some time for its investigative journalism and that the latest incident may be as part of efforts to silence the paper. The paper's editor-in-chief, Rehmat Shah Afridi, has been in detention since April 1999 on drug charges for which the prosecution has failed to produce any compelling evidence. Before his arrest, the *Frontier Post* had documented official corruption. He appears to be a prisoner of conscience detained solely for his right to freedom of expression exercised in the course of his work as a journalist.

The Chief Executive of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, said that firm action under the law has already been taken and that offenders will be dealt with strictly in accordance with law. He insisted that his government believes in complete freedom of the press but would not allow the publication of derogatory and sacrilegious material. He said he hoped the press would understand and appreciate the application of relevant laws.

In view of the uncertainties of the case and the serious allegations of vested interests in shutting down the newspaper, Amnesty International appeals to the Government of Pakistan to institute a thorough judicial inquiry of the incident before proceeding with the criminal charges.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or Urdu or your own language:

- Urging the Government of Pakistan to ensure the safety of everyone connected with the *Frontier Post*, including those charged in the case;
- Calling on the Government of Pakistan to conduct a full and impartial investigation into the incident, including a review of charges that have been brought and to release those in detention if the charges cannot be substantiated.

APPEALS TO:

Pakistani fax numbers can be very difficult to reach. Please be patient and keep trying.

General Pervez Musharraf
 Chief Executive
 National Security Council
 General Block, Pakistan Secretariat
 Islamabad, Pakistan

Telegrams: General Pervez Musharraf, Islamabad, Pakistan

Faxes: + 92 51 922 4768

Email: CE@pak.gov.pk

Salutation: Dear Chief Executive

Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Iftikhar Hussain Shah

Governor of North West Frontier Province
Governor's House
Peshawar, Pakistan

Telegrams: Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Iftikhar Hussain Shah, Peshawar, Pakistan

Faxes: + 92 91 921 0751

Salutation: Dear Governor

COPIES TO:

Diplomatic representatives of Pakistan accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 13 March 2001.