

Churches and Christian homes torched by mob in Pakistan

Country/Region: PAKISTAN

The Christian community in Sangla Hill village in the province of Punjab, Pakistan, came under attack from a crowd of angry Muslim extremists on 12th November, following a false allegation of desecrating a Qur'an. At least three churches were set on fire as well as several Christian homes, a Christian girls' school, hostel and other Christian premises.

It appears that on November 11th Yousaf Masih, a Christian, spent an evening playing cards with some Muslim friends. Not long after Yousaf left a fire broke out in an adjoining building, and a copy of the Qur'an was burnt. Yousaf's friends, angry that he had won their game, accused him of burning the Qur'an. The story that a Christian had burnt a Qur'an spread quickly. A case was registered with the Sangla Hill police, accusing Yousaf under Pakistan's notorious "blasphemy law" of desecrating the Qur'an (Section 295B of the Pakistan Penal Code).

Reports indicate that within hours of the allegation, the Muslim youth were being urged by the mosques to attack Christian property. Fearful of the violence which so often follows blasphemy accusations in Pakistan, the Christian community requested protection; however it appears no action was taken by the police.

The main attack came the following morning, 12th November. Eye-witnesses report that between 2,000 to 5,000 angry Muslims, armed with sticks, rods, axes and kerosene or other inflammable agents, marched on Sangla Hill, chanting slogans and burning Christian property. Many of the Christians fled for their lives. According to one church leader, at least some of the rioters were brought in on buses. The attack lasted two to three hours, during which time there was no police intervention to stop the violence.

Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, international director of Barnabas Fund comments:

"This appalling violence is yet another example of the misuse of Section 295 of the Pakistan Penal Code, which has so often been exploited by Muslims with a personal grudge against Christians. As has happened many times before, the whole Christian community came under attack and suffered violence as a result of an unproved allegation against an individual. What is particularly alarming are the indications that this attack was well planned and not spontaneous."

Please Pray:

1. Please pray for Yousaf Masih, who is at present in hiding. Pray that he will be able to re-establish his life. Pray that his innocence will be proven. According to press reports in Pakistan, his brother Salim was taken into custody.
2. Pray for the Christian community at Sangla Hill village as they begin to rebuild their homes and society. Pray that they will be protected from further violence. Pray that those who have lost homes or possessions will find comfort in the One who supplies all our needs. (Matt 6 v 25-34).
3. Thank the Lord for the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim leaders who have joined with Christian leaders to condemn this violence. Pray that the Pakistani Government will respond by seeking true justice for Christians, and will take action to amend or repeal the "blasphemy law" to stop other innocent individuals being persecuted under it.