

Shafqat Emmanuel and his wife Shagufta Kausar (also known as Shagufta Masih) were accused of sending blasphemous text messages, even though both are illiterate.

They were sentenced to death in April 2014 under Section 295-C of Pakistan's Penal Code which stipulates a mandatory death sentence for "derogatory remarks" against Muhammad, the prophet of Islam.

The couple, who have four children, have always denied the charges. In May 2021 the European Parliament drew attention to the lack of evidence against them.

Pakistan's notorious "blasphemy" laws are often used to make false accusations in order to settle personal grudges.

At least eight Christians have been left with fractured bones after the small Christian community of Chak 5, a village in the Okara region of Punjab, was terrorised by a Muslim mob of around 200 people.

One of the Christians, Mangta Masih, was reported to have lost his thumb when attacked by a sickle blade.

On 14 May a Muslim man, named locally as Khalil, accused Mangta and two other Christians who were cleaning the entrance of the village church of

throwing dust at him. Khalil and five other men attacked the Christians with weapons, injuring all three. The following day the 200-strong mob launched an attack on Christian homes.

A Christian woman reported, "Young girls were assaulted and left with torn clothes."

Local church minister Khalid Mukhtar said that despite prompt police action the 80 traumatised Christian families in the area feared another attack.

Praise God for answering prayers for the acquittal of Shafqat and Shagufta. Rejoice that He hears His elect who cry out to Him day and night (Luke 18:7). Pray that this couple will receive Divine guidance as they make the huge adjustment to returning to society. Ask the Lord to shield them against any violent backlash from zealous Muslims. Continue to pray for justice for those accused of "blasphemy" and that the Holy Spirit will lead those in authority, both political and judicial, to grant further acquittals. Cry out to the Lord for His people in the Okara region, especially Mangta and his family, that they will experience God's protection (Psalm 32:7), and ask for an easing of tension in the region.

Barnabas Prayer Focus

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hope and aid for the persecuted church

A monthly resource for individuals and prayer groups produced by Barnabas Fund

Number 297 - July 2021



Burkina Faso – Armed men kill 15 at baptism

Armed men, suspected to be jihadi militants, attacked a baptism ceremony in the village of Adjarara, Oudalan province on 18 May, killing 15 people.

Many others were forced to flee the village, located in mainly Christian northern Burkina Faso near the border with Mali, in fear of their lives.

While no group has claimed responsibility for the attack, groups affiliated to both Al Qaeda and Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) are active across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

The Sahel region of Africa, along with parts of West Africa such as Nigeria, has in the last few years become the epicentre of global jihadi activity.

On 12 May five Christians were killed during a terrorist attack in the Tillabéri region, Niger.

In August 2020 at least six people, mostly children, were killed when an improvised explosive device (IED) detonated on a road in northern Burkina Faso.

Lift up those who are grieving the loss of loved ones and ask that they will

have the grace to stand firm under trial (1 Corinthians 16:13). Ask that they will be assured of how precious these saints are in God's sight (Psalm 116:15). Pray that the public demonstration of faith at the baptism ceremony will have a lasting effect that will draw even hardened persecutors to Christ. Ask that the authorities throughout the Sahel region will be effective in preventing jihadi violence.

India – Heavy Covid-19 death toll includes many Christian leaders; Anti-conversion law introduced in Gujarat; Widow forced to re-convert; Hindu mob destroys church in Odisha

On 2 June Barnabas Fund's project partners reported that well over 2,000 pastors and other Christian leaders had died of Covid-19 in India. At least 40 ministries are in danger of closing down, simply because no one is available to replace the leaders who have died.

Both India and Nepal have lost many church leaders to the pandemic,

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leaving their sick, frightened and hungry congregations without pastoral care.

Many recovering Covid-19 patients in India have been infected by the “black fungus” which maims or kills many of its victims. Nepal’s much weaker health infrastructure makes its situation even more critical.

In Gujarat State, Christians are contesting a new law designed to increase state control of religious schools.

The Gujarat Secondary and Higher Secondary Education (Amendment) Act stipulates that a new Central Recruitment Committee will appoint teachers and head teachers. Schools must accept teaching appointments within seven days or risk being de-registered.

The state government also announced a new anti-conversion amendment which renders forced or fraudulent conversions punishable by up to ten years’ imprisonment. It becomes illegal to persuade somebody to convert with the promise of “divine blessings”. If the law is applied rigorously, Christians could be prosecuted for telling non-Christians that repenting and believing in Christ will bring forgiveness for sins and everlasting life.

A Christian widow in Odisha State was forced to re-convert to her old traditional animistic religion by villagers who threatened to prevent her husband’s funeral.

The husband, from the Koya tribal group, had professed faith in Christ and started to attend church with his wife.

After his death the Koya villagers forcibly took money from the widow, coerced her into re-joining their community and conducted the funeral in the traditional, non-Christian way. She was also physically attacked by her husband’s brother.

Also in Odisha, a crowd of around 150 Hindu extremists attacked and destroyed

a church building being constructed in the village of Bodoguda. The church was to serve a community of twelve Christian families who live alongside 60 Hindu families.

Call on the Father of compassion (2 Corinthians 1:3) to comfort His people in India and Nepal as they grieve for loved ones. Ask God to raise up new leaders, full of faith and the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:24) to take on responsibilities in His strength. Pray that legal protections for Christian schools will not be eroded and that the anti-conversion laws will be repealed. Intercede for Christians that they will be faithful in bearing gentle yet powerful witness (1 Peter 3:15) amid the legal minefield. Cry out for justice for the Christian widow, that she is allowed to practise her faith unhindered. Ask that the believers whose church was destroyed depend on Christ, their cornerstone, and are empowered to communicate this truth lovingly to their persecutors (Matthew 5:44).

Indonesia – Police foil Islamist terrorist plot to bomb churches in Papua; Terrorists kill four Christian farmers in Central Sulawesi

Police have uncovered an Islamist terrorist plot to attack several churches in suicide bombings and assassinate a leading church minister in the Christian-majority province of Papua. They arrested at least ten suspected members of Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), which has links to the Islamic State terrorist group, on 28 May.

One suspect revealed during questioning that suicide bombers had attempted twice to kill one of Papua’s most senior church leaders but he survived because on both the occasions that he was targeted he was out of town.

Whereas JAD functions throughout Indonesia, East Indonesia Mujahideen’s operations are confined largely to Central Sulawesi province. On 11 May five sword-wielding men from this group killed four Christian farmers in Poso district.

The Mujahideen leader Ali Kalora, who has affirmed allegiance to Islamic State, is being hunted by police.

Praise the Lord for answering prayer that the Indonesian government be effective in their efforts to control Islamic extremists. Give thanks for the foiling of the terrorist plot in Papua, and for His wonderful protection (Psalm 116:8) in twice preserving the life of the senior church leader. Praise God for intervening to thwart the plans of His people’s enemies (Isaiah 8:10) and ask that Christians will be protected from further attacks. Uphold the farming community in Central Sulawesi as they mourn the horrific loss of the four farmers and pray that they will receive courage, peace and hope.

Algeria – Christians celebrate return of historic church building but further church closures reported

A historic church building in the port city of Mostaganem that was appropriated by a local authority has been returned to the Church. Several places of worship of historical significance had been requisitioned for secular use over the past decade.

The Église Protestante d’Algérie (EPA), the Protestant Church in Algeria, had campaigned through extensive court cases for such buildings to be returned to Church ownership.

Although a verdict in May 2019 was agreed in their favour, through

administrative delays the building was not returned to the EPA until May 2021.

By contrast, the closure of many other church buildings by the authorities continues.

According to a 2006 ordinance, the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship grants permits for churches but, so far, no permits have been issued, despite repeated applications by churches.

On 4 June, the administrative court of Oran ordered the closure of three churches in the area. A date is to be set when the authorities will seal the churches. There are now 16 churches that have been sealed in Algeria, most notably the 500-congregation Source of Life Church in Makouda, one of three buildings sealed on 15 October 2019.

Give thanks for the restoration of the church building in Mostaganem to Church ownership. Rejoice that God’s Church is being built (Matthew 16:18) even amid government opposition and pray that no delays prevent further restitution of church property. Seek the Lord that the organised clampdown against Christians will cease and laws hindering Christian worship will be cancelled or amended. Call on the Lord to open doors that are normally shut to humans and that just as Jesus broke seven seals (Revelation 5:5), the sealed churches will be reopened.

Pakistan – Your prayers answered as Christian couple are acquitted of “blasphemy” charges; Christian villagers terrorised by 200-strong Muslim mob in Punjab

A Christian couple on death row since being convicted of “blasphemy” in 2014 have been acquitted of all charges in an appeal hearing at Lahore High Court.