

International Hearing on
“Misuse of the blasphemy law and the plight of religious minorities” in
Pakistan”
17-19 September 2012
Geneva, Switzerland

Background:

The crisis in Pakistan revolves around an array of alarming problems, among those resurgence of religious extremism and persecution against religious minorities. During the forty years following the founding of Pakistan in 1947, the then existing Blasphemy Law was considered adequate and no government felt the need for any changes. However, in 1986, General Zia Ul Haq introduced a number of amendments to the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) at the behest of the Islamic parties in the country to establish the army’s credential as Defender of the Faith.

Misuse of Blasphemy Law

The blasphemy law was originally supposed to protect the religious sensitivities of the country’s Muslim majority, however since 1986 it is often used to persecute religious minorities and has become a major source of victimization. The current law imposes life imprisonment for desecrating the Holy Quran and the death penalty for defaming the Prophet Mohammad.

It has been a quarter of a century since religious minorities in Pakistan have been living in a state of fear and terror, as the Blasphemy Law has become a source of friction between the country’s majority – the Muslims – and minority religious communities, namely Christians, Hindus and Ahmadiya. Many victims of the Law have had to seek asylum in countries abroad for their security and others are forced to live in hiding.

The Blasphemy Law, while purporting to protect Islam and religious sensitivities of the Muslim majority, is vaguely formulated and arbitrarily enforced by the police and judiciary in a way which amounts to harassment and persecution. It has become one of the most stringent laws in the country, as the law itself provides only a vague definition of blasphemy, and yet leads to the death sentence in some instances.

WCC accompanying churches in Pakistan

Over the years, the WCC has accompanied churches in Pakistan through pastoral visits, fact finding missions, official letters to the authorities and public statements, expressing concern about the growing religious intolerance which has, in many instances, resulted in gross human rights violations.

The WCC has repeatedly called on the government of Pakistan to repeal Sections 295 B and C of the Penal Code, as they cover the Blasphemy Law, and has pointed out that these developments are in violation of article 36 of the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan that recognizes and protects minorities in Pakistan.

Recently, in October 2011, the WCC General Secretary visited Pakistan and called for the protection of religious minorities in the country. In December 2011, the WCC organized a solidarity visit to Pakistan to accompany and show solidarity to Christians living in the country. The visit included a meeting with churches and civil society, as well as a meeting with the Prime Minister of Pakistan.