

WCC calls for repeal of Pakistan Blasphemy Law after killings

WCC press release 23 July 2010

"Great dismay" at the shooting and killing of two young Christians in Faisalabad on 19 July was expressed by the World Council of Churches (WCC) general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit in letters to Pakistan's president and its prime minister.

Pastor Rashid Emmanuel and his brother Sajid Emmanuel were shot dead on court premises by unidentified gunmen when they were taken there by police to face a charge of blasphemy against Islam.

In his letters, Tveit appealed to the Pakistani authorities "to ensure immediate and necessary actions to bring to justice those who are responsible" for the murders.

He also reiterated the concern that the "misuse of the Blasphemy Law in Pakistan has led to physical violence, damage, destruction of properties and loss of life", and called on the Pakistani leaders "to initiate measures towards the repeal of the Blasphemy Laws and to secure the rights and dignity of all individuals in Pakistan society".

In a public **statement on "The misuse of the Blasphemy Law and the security of religious minorities in Pakistan"**, the WCC Central Committee considered that the law had become "a major source of victimization and persecution" of religious minorities who are living "in a state of fear and terror", in September 2009.

"We do not know what to do. We are helpless," Victor Azariah, general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Pakistan, which groups four Protestant churches, told Ecumenical News International on 21 July from his office in Lahore.

Church groups say Pakistan's controversial blasphemy law, which provides for a mandatory death sentence or life imprisonment even for unintentional blasphemy offences, is often misused against Christians and others to settle property and personal disputes.

Pakistan: Blasphemy Law misused to harass religious minorities

WCC press release 01.09.09

The WCC Central Committee called on the government of Pakistan to "guarantee the rights of all religious minorities in the country".

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“a major source of victimization and persecution” of religious minorities who are living “in a state of fear and terror”.

Since the penal code of the country was amended in 1986, “Christians in particular have become targets of harassments and persecutions”, says the statement approved by the WCC central committee during its meeting from August 26 to September 2 in Geneva, Switzerland.

From then on, the attacks against the religious minorities have been exacerbated, and an atmosphere of violence motivated by religious issues exists in various regions in Pakistan.

The Blasphemy Law, where the concept “blasphemy” is vaguely defined according to the WCC statement, establishes that any person accused is immediately placed in detention and can be sentenced to death. From 1988 to 2005, 647 people have been accused of violating this law, but cases have increased in the last years.

The WCC followed with concern what happened a few weeks ago in Gojra, Punjab Province. Several Christians were killed there –some burnt alive– and their houses torched “by militant Islamic groups who constantly threaten the Christian minorities with false allegations”, a letter by the WCC general secretary to the Pakistan government stated on 3 August 2009.

Human Rights organizations observed that charges brought against individuals under the Blasphemy Law are founded solely on the individual’s religious convictions. In other cases, the charges are based on malicious accusations “often with the motivation to have people imprisoned to gain advantage in business or land disputes”.

In its statement, WCC recalls the words of the founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, when the country was created, that “minorities are a sacred trust of Pakistan”. The WCC also considers that these discriminatory actions and attacks against religious minorities are in violation of the Constitution of Pakistan (Article 36) that guarantees the legitimate rights of minorities.

WCC urges the government of Pakistan to repeal the section of the Pakistan penal code (295C) which carries a mandatory death penalty for anyone found guilty of blasphemy. It also calls on WCC member churches to request their respective governments to express their concerns on the security of religious minorities in Pakistan.

Orthodox, Anglican and other churches representing more than 560 million Christians in over 110 countries, and works cooperatively with the Roman Catholic Church. The WCC general secretary is Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, from the [Lutheran] Church of Norway. Headquarters: Geneva, Switzerland.