

Pakistani Christians demand protection after the suicide attack on Easter Sunday - The attackers' main target was Pakistan's poor Christian community

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Christian leaders demand protection after the suicide attack on Easter Sunday in Lahore, Pakistan. According to the latest reports, at least 74 people, both Christians and Muslims were killed, including 29 children. Over 370 people were injured in the blast on 27 March, at Gulshan Iqbal Park in Lahore. Lahore is the capital of Punjab province and the second-largest city of Pakistan. Christians make up only 5 percent of the 80 million population of the city. On the other hand, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said in a statement on 6 April that coordinated paramilitary operations against terrorists had been launched in Southern Punjab, which is assisted by Pakistani army.

At the time of the blast, about 3,000 people were visiting the park, where some Christian families were celebrating Easter, following the prayer services. Many wounded people are still in hospitals, and some are still in critical condition. It is estimated that around 32 Christians, mostly young children, from Nishtar Colony, Youhanabad, Bahar Colony, Khaliqnagar and Awan Market of Lahore have died in this Islamist suicide bombing strike. On Sunday, 4 April, the whole Pakistani nation remembered the victims of Lahore Carnage. Churches throughout Pakistan organised special prayer services while throughout the day, Muslim families visited their loved ones' graves in Lahore.

Along with the Pakistani nation, the international community also condemned the devastated incident. Pope Francis called it a bloodied and hideous attack and demanded protection of the country's religious minorities, especially Christians, who were the main target of the attack.

Jamat-ul-Ahrar, a splinter group of the Pakistani Taliban, who has a close association with the Islamic State, claimed responsibility for this deadly attack. Ehsanullah Ehsan, a spokesman of the group said, "We claim responsibility for the attack on Christians as they were celebrating Easter." Later, the group released the picture of the suicide attacker, identified as Salahuddin Khurasani. Jamaat-ul-Ahrar was based in the Mohmand agency of the tribal areas, led by Umar Khalid Khurasani. In March last year, the same terrorist group attacked two churches in Lahore. Lahore is the capital of Pakistan's largest Punjab province and is the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's hometown. The attackers' main target was Pakistan's poor Christian community. It was also a message to the government that these blood-thirsty groups are still capable of striking whenever and wherever they want, despite a yearlong military operation against terrorists in the northern part of the country. Though, the Taliban confessed that they were responsible for the attack, ironically, their apologists, are once again, promoting the same conspiracy theories to mislead the nation. Sadly, many people believe these theories, which is dividing the nation and strengthening the terrorists' narrative. Islamists say that these attacks are a conspiracy of the international forces against the Islamic groups.

On the Easter Day, a suicide bomber blew himself up at the exit gate of the park at around 6.35 p.m.

when children were playing on swings, and families were enjoying other recreational activities in the park. According to eyewitnesses, there were no proper security arrangements in and around the playground, which made it easy for the suicide bomber to enter the park without much difficulty and blow himself in the crowded area.

Immediately after the blast, Christian leaders asked the community to be peaceful and called for unity and brotherhood. They said terrorists want to destroy our unity, but we have to stay together to defeat them. People immediately rushed to the playground to help the victims, and many young people gathered outside the hospitals to donate blood for the wounded. Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Sikh, all showed solidarity through peaceful protests against the terrorists and organised peace vigils for the victims. Church leaders visited both the Christians and Muslims injured people in Sheikh Zaid and Jinnah Hospitals in Lahore, and prayed for them. They also prayed for the medical staff who worked tirelessly to save as many people as they could under the constant pressure.

The Punjab government announced three days of mourning in memory of the victims, and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif chaired a special meeting after the blast to review the security situation in the country. As the provincial government was not yet ready to go after the militants, General Raheel Sharif immediately gave orders to the army to start an operation against militants in the province. "Since the 1980s, many of Pakistan's extremist groups have been sponsored and trained by the army's intelligence services to fight for control of Indian Kashmir or, on occasion, to attack other Indian targets. Such support from the military has now mostly ended. But the real test of General Sharif's determination to root out terrorism from Pakistan has always been in Punjab," Ahmed Rashid, a renowned Pakistani journalist, wrote in the New York Books on 31 March. In the operation, the authorities arrested over 300 suspected militants from the various areas of the province.

Pakistan has been suffering from terrorism since 2001, but the Pakistani authorities largely ignored the activities of these militant groups. Until now, at least 60,000 people have lost their lives at the hands of these terrorists. It is a familiar pattern that after every major attack, the government pledges to fight terrorism and ensures the nation that the security risks are at the lowest level during that time. Despite the government's claims, the Sunday attack exposed the weak security situation in the country.

The attack occurred on the same day when the supporters of Mumtaz Qadri, murderer of Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer, a liberal Muslim, entered into Islamabad's Red Zone demanded for no amendment in the blasphemy laws, and also they demanded for Qadri's public declaration as a hero. The protesters were violent ; they beat police, burned vehicles and buildings. Qadri, a self-confessed assassin, a conservative Muslim, was hanged on 29 February. Qadri assassinated Taseer because of his views on Pakistani's controversial blasphemy laws and for Taseer's support to a poor Christian woman, Asia Bibi. She was arrested in June 2009, and was convicted and sentenced under the blasphemy laws. Against the High Court's judgment, she appealed in the country's Supreme Court and is waiting for the date of the hearing now. The blasphemy laws were introduced in the 1980s by General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88), a military dictator, under his Islamisation policy. Since Qadri was executed, Christians were fearing the backlash. Though TTP did not mention this factor in their claim about the Easter Sunday's blast, Christians believe this factor was one of the reasons of the latest attack.

According to Minority Concern, suicide attacks targeting Christians are not uncommon in Pakistan. On 14 March 2015, 21 people were killed and more than 80 have been injured in the suicide attacks by the Taliban at the two churches in Youhanabad, a dense Christian neighborhood in Lahore. On 23 September 2013, Taliban suicide bombers attacked All Saints Church in Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, where some 80 Christians were killed, and about 120 people were

injured. The majority of them were women and children. It is a sad reality that the state has failed to punish those who killed many innocent Christians outside their churches. Religious minorities, especially Christian community in Pakistan, are persecuted groups by all standards. They face discrimination and usually they are the soft targets of hardliners and militants. Violence against minority groups « is deeply embedded within the political and social processes in Pakistan, » said Umair Javed, a columnist for a Pakistani newspaper. Sadly, many Pakistanis portrayed Hindus as enemies, while Christians as agents of the West. Both communities are also considered infidels. However, the state is still silently watching hatred based views without stopping them. Since its creation in 1947, Pakistan religious minorities made up 15 percent of the population, which has reduced to less than 4 percent now. The Dean of social sciences faculty at Szabist, Dr Riaz Sheikh, maintains that the social construction of Pakistani society has been based on religion and hatred of people from other faiths. This is why societal marginality in Pakistan has increased where the majority has the power over minority communities, whose space in the society has shrunk.” Christians are the second largest minority group making up about 1.6 percent of the total population. Violence and intimidation aimed at the Christian minority have escalated in Pakistan in the recent years. The vulnerable Christian community is demanding that the government of Nawaz Sharif, a conservative Muslim and whose success has depended on support of religious parties for protection, should take strong measures to protect them. Minority Rights Group International (MRG) categorise Pakistan as one of the world’s most dangerous countries for religious minorities. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has designated Pakistan as a « country of particular concern » since 2002, due to the government’s failure to intervene against violence targeting religious minorities. As Christians are losing trust in the government because of the growing violence and persecution, migration of this community has increased sharply.

Lahore blast was an addition in the long history of persecution of Pakistani Christians. Pakistan has surrendered itself to the idea that it can support militant outfits operating outside its borders while deploring them at home, Fatima Bhutto exerted. Christians claim that the government only preaches against terrorism, but is afraid of losing the votes of extremists. “The fact remains that in Pakistan, there is a disturbing trend of glorification of religiously motivated violence. The problem of terrorism cannot be solved by military operations alone, since it is a matter of deeply ingrained mind-sets,” Daily Times said on 29 March. Without challenging terrorists’ ideology and their narrative, no change is possible. Christians say that as a first step, the government should eradicate fundamentalism from textbooks, state institutions and from public discourse. Mr. Sharif is now faced with a series of very difficult challenges. He must protect Pakistan’s Christians and other religious minorities. He will have to discard his reluctance to take on militant groups based in Punjab. And he will have to assert the state’s resolve to uphold the rule of law, without capitulating to pressure from a religious mob, writes Omar Waraich in The Independent.

If Pakistan wants to prosper as a state, it should revisit its policies based on religious ideology. The time has proven that these policies have not brought any good to the country and its people, rather divided and paralysed the nation. If it’s like to become an honourable member of the international community, Pakistan needs to become a liberal-democratic country, in its true sense. Moreover, the state must accept minorities as equal citizen and take necessary steps for the promotion of democratic values, equality, pluralism and human rights. In addition, if Pakistan is really serious about eradicating terrorism, then it must challenge the culture of violence and hatred, and should go after every militant group without any distinction. Without eliminating all sorts of militants groups, Pakistan cannot progress. Otherwise, general public will continue live in a culture of fear, and the persecution of minorities will never end.

Aftab Alexander Mughal

P.S.

* Aftab Alexander Mughal is the editor of the Minority Concern of Pakistan magazine and former National Executive Secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission of Pakistan.