

Rashid Rehman Khan: A prominent human rights defender gunned down in Punjab (Pakistan)

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A Statement from the Asian Human Rights Commission

PAKISTAN: AHRC condemns the assassination of a prominent human rights defender and places the responsibility on the government of Punjab

A lawyer and prominent human rights defender, Mr. Rashid Rehman Khan, was gunned down yesterday by unknown persons at his chambers at 8.45 p.m. He had been receiving death threats from the Muslim fundamentalists since February. In the month of April he was threatened in court during the proceedings before the judge by a lawyer, Zulfiqar Sindhu and two other complainants and was warned that from the next hearing he should not defend a Muslim lecturer of Bahawalpur University in a case of Blasphemy. Sindhu actually stated before the judge that Mr. Rehman would be eliminated. The presiding judge remained silent and took no notice of the threats by the bigots who were forcing the judge to sentence the lecturer to death.

Mr. Rehman has informed the district administration of Multan, Punjab, the district police officer, judiciary and the bar associations of the country about the threats to his life. He was the coordinator of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), Multan. The HRCP has also intimated to the provincial government and Inspector General of Police (IGP), Punjab province, about the threats, particularly those from the lawyer in the court room. The HRCP has also demanded the IGP to provide security to Mr. Rehman. However, as is typical in cases involving religious bigots the police and Punjab provincial government ignored the request.

Mr. Rehman was a friend of the Asian Human Rights Commission and sent information on cases of human rights abuses.

In a report published in *The Express Tribune* on April 13, Mr. Rehman said he had been threatened by five people, both inside and outside the court, for representing Junaid Hafeez - a man accused of committing blasphemy using his Facebook account. Two of those who threatened him were part of the prosecution team in the case, he had said at the time. In addition to them, three unidentified men had also warned him to drop the case or he would not be able to come to court to represent Junaid. The Special Branch of the Punjab police later alerted law enforcement agencies, according to another report published in *The Express Tribune* on April 29. However, no case was registered against the three men even though Mr. Rehman had submitted an application in this regard.

On the night of May 7, Mr. Rehman and his fellow lawyer were sitting with a client in their private chambers near Kutchery Square, Multan, when two people approached them. They climbed the

stairs to the chamber, located on a higher floor, and opened fire at them. Each of the assailants fired at least 12 bullets at their victims. Following the attack, the assailants managed to escape via the main road. Mr. Rehman died on the spot while his colleague was shot three times and the client twice. They were rushed to Nishtar hospital where Mr. Rehman was pronounced dead on arrival. Doctors added that he had received fatal injuries from three bullets.

The News reported that the Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP), Cantt Ali Mardan Khosan, said that he knew of the threats to Khan, and that they were investigating the incident.

The local administration of the district termed the threats to Mr. Rehman to be of no significance and said that when a lawyer and his companions are threatened in court it does not mean that anyone would be attacked. This message was also conveyed to Mr. Rehman by the administration.

Such incidents of the killings of human rights defenders continue with impunity and the indifferent attitudes of the successive governments who treat human rights defenders as the enemies of the country and even to Islam. Female human rights defenders are not even spared from assassinations and not a single attacker has ever been brought before a court of law.

HRCP mourns the loss of Rashid Rehman

Lahore, May 8: The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan is deeply grieved at the killing of its Multan Task Force coordinator, Rashid Rehman, Advocate.

Rashid was a committed rights activist and lawyer and had been associated with HRCP for over twenty years.

It must be recalled that on 10 April, through a statement, the Commission had brought it to the attention of the authorities that Rashid was being openly threatened by prosecution lawyers in the Multan District Prison where he was representing a blasphemy accused. The hearing was being held in the prison due to security concerns. The judge, it was reported, did not take any notice of threats issued to Rashid in his presence. Three persons had addressed defence lawyer Rashid Rehman in the judge's presence and said: 'You will not come to court next time because you will not exist any more.'

It is regrettable that no attention was paid to HRCP's or Rashid's concerns and nothing was done to apprehend the three persons who had threatened Rashid. In its earlier statement, HRCP had demanded that the three persons who had threatened defence lawyer Rashid Rehman in the case be "proceeded against under the law without delay and effective measures are taken to ensure the defence lawyer's security."

HRCP demands that cases be immediately registered against those who had threatened Rashid and his killers be brought to justice. It would be a travesty of justice for the cause of human rights and for Rashid's family if this plea was also ignored and meaningful action was not taken.

Rashid had bravely decided to represent a blasphemy accused in a society where bigots believe that those accused do not have the right of defence. In his death, HRCP has lost a courageous and committed human rights defender. The forces of religious extremism, unchecked by the state, may

have won a battle but not the war.

HRCP | May 8, 2014

Zohra Yusuf

Chairperson
