

# **Pakistan: After a Church was Attacked, Pakistani Christians Celebrated Christmas under Security**

Saturday 30 December 2017, by [MUGHAL Aftab Alexander](#) (Date first published: 26 December 2017).

(December 26, 2017) - Despite the security challenges, Pakistan Christians, a tiny minority, celebrated Christmas with religious fervour. Just a week before the Christmas day, another terrorist attack struck a church in Pakistan. By attacking the church in Quetta, which was full of worshippers, the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) sent a shock wave by a bloody message to the vulnerable Christians that they have to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ in fear. Though Christians throughout the country celebrated Christmas under tight security and were cautious, they decorated their houses and attended Christmas celebration with the full religious spirit. Some media reports said that terrorists were still planning to attack more churches. The Counter Terrorism Department arrested 3 terrorists - Naveed, Shahid and Arshad - from Muzaffargarh, Southern Punjab, on December 22. All three belonged to ISIS and were from Toba Tek Singh, Sahiwal and Okara. DPO Muzaffargarh, Awas Ahmed said, these terrorists wanted to conduct attacks on Christmas day. Police personals were installed to provide security to the worshippers during the special prayer services on the Christmas day.

On December 17, when a Christmas programme for children was under way on Sunday, around 12 noon, four terrorists attacked the Bethel Memorial Methodist Church, built in 1935, on Zarghoon Road in Quetta, some 40 miles from the Afghan border, the capital of Baluchistan, which is the most militarised province in the country. They killed at least nine Christian men, women and children, and wounded 56 others, among them nine are in critical condition. At the time of the attack, nearly 400 worshippers were present in the church. First, they killed the church's security guard George Masih, a Christian by faith. The other security personnel at the church reacted immediately, resulting in intense firing from both sides. As a result, two terrorists managed to escape. One was killed, and the other tried to enter the church hall. As he could not manage to get into the hall, he quickly detonated his suicide vest, which was filled with explosives, and blew himself up right near the main door of the church. Most of the casualties and injuries took place near the main door because of a load explosion and heavy explosives. Most of the injured people were taken to the Civil Hospital, which was nearest to the church. The Islamic State's regional affiliate, known as Islamic State in Khorasan, a much-feared terrorist group, claimed responsibility through its Aamaq News service. However, the agency did not give any further details. Mir Sarfraz Bugti, Home Minister of Baluchistan, stated that the terrorists wanted to take hostages inside the church, but they could not succeed because of the quick intervention of the security forces.

Quetta has witnessed repeated attacks on religious minorities, including Hazara community with little protection or concern shown by the government. Now, there is an overwhelming feeling of insecurity among Christians, and they are feeling increasingly unsafe. Christians are a tiny minority among the local population and run several educational and health institutions, which serve the local communities regardless of faith and ethnicity. In the attack, the church was damaged severely. Approximately, the damaged caused more than Rs. 1,000,000. Khalil George, a Christian member of the National Assembly from Quetta, belongs to PML-N, demanded the government for more security and necessary funds to ensure protection for the churches. He also asked the government to allocate

a compensation of 30 million rupees to the families of the victims and 10 million for each wounded person.

The recent attack on a church just happened one day after the nation observed the third anniversary of the Army Public School attack in Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The state repeatedly claims that the backbone of the terrorists has been broken through the anti-terrorist operations. However, a question remains, how are terrorists still able to conduct attacks in many major cities and secure areas? It, certainly, shows the flaws in security policy despite the on-going military operation. Rather than answering the fundamental questions, the state is only focusing on praising security personnel, who stopped the terrorists and preventing a greater loss of lives. The editorial of Dawn says, "The state appears to be caught in a defensive crouch, lashing out at real and perceived external enemies but unable to bring greater coherence and organisation to the fight against militancy." In addition, the state always denies the presence of ISIS in the country, while in the recent years, the organisation has claimed responsibility for several bloody attacks. The on-going trend of militancy shows that the state's policies are inconsistent to address this menace. Obviously, militancy cannot be curtailed by appeasing some terrorist groups in the guise of national security. Militancy will keep flourishing, by tolerating those preachers who incite violence and promote hate speech, as the nation has seen just weeks ago during the Faizabad protests in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, by a Muslim religious leader and his followers. Hate speech breeds radicalisation, militancy and terrorism, and also strengthens the dark mind-set. After visiting the church and injured in Quetta's hospitals, Christian and Muslim members, mainly from Punjab, of the Interfaith Advisory Commission (IAC) called upon the government to address the root causes of intolerance and extremism. They asked that the freedom of everyone at any cost, as the constitution declares that all citizens are equal.

Christians are the second largest minority of the country and make up only 2 per cent of the country's population. About 80 per cent live in the Punjab province, and most of them are marginalised and in low jobs. The Quetta attack spread horror countrywide among this besieged community who was in a festive mode during the Christmas season. This assault raised concerns over the security of Christian minority, which is always an easy target. "Despite its regular claims, the state has badly failed in protecting minorities," Javaid Nazir, a Christian social worker, told the Newline. Daily Times said, "The group that incites violence against minority communities are unfortunately not only given space by the government but seems to enjoy a greater power than the state institutions."

Christian community and its worship places across the country have been targeted frequently by terrorists since 2001. On October 28, 2001, Christian worshippers were attacked inside the Saint Dominic's Church in Bahawalpur, Punjab province, by six assailants who belonged to Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, an Islamic sectarian organisation. They killed a Muslim guard of the church and 17 other Christians, and injured more than a dozen parishioners. In 2002, terrorists attacked a church in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, and killed 5 people and injured many. In September 2013, when the federal government was having talks with the Taliban factions, a twin suicide bombing at the All Saints Church in Peshawar resulted in the killing of 127 people. It was the deadliest attack against Christians in Pakistan. On March 14, 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. In a suicide attack on March 27, 2016 (on Easter Sunday) at Gulshan Iqbal Park in Lahore, the capital of Punjab province and the second-largest city of Pakistan. At least 74 people, both Christians and Muslims were killed; including 29 children, over 370 people were injured. On September 2, 2016, a Christian colony at the outskirts of Peshawar came under attack early morning, by the militants of TTP-Ahrar faction. The terrorists entered the locality after killing one and injuring two civilian security guards. Prompt response by the army, Frontier Corps and

police averted the terrorists' plan, and all four attackers were killed.

Pakistan has been suffering from terrorism since 2001, but the Pakistani authorities largely ignored the activities of some sectarian, militant and terrorist 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. Moreover, it blames the neighbouring countries for troubles. As usual, this time again, the government shifted the blame towards Afghanistan. It was said that Afghanistan has safe havens of militants. However, blaming others cannot solve our problems. The state must address its root causes. So, there is a bigger need to look inward to address the issues of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism. Regrettably, some Christian leaders, who want to please the authorities, follow the same narrative and say that terrorists are against the development of Pakistan. They totally ignore the fundamental questions and try to divert the attention from the main issues. They also ignore the fact that Pakistan's minority communities not only face danger from militants and terrorists but often even from their fellow citizens who consider them inferior. In many incidents, local Muslim mobs of thousands of people attacked Christian houses, Churches and their institutions in Shantinagar, Sangla Hill, Kasur, Gojra, Lahore and in many other villages and cities. One of the reasons is the continuous hatred and intolerance against minorities promoted by some state and non-state actors. The editorial of The Express Tribune says, "The (Quetta church) attack underscores the vulnerability of minority groups in Pakistan, whether they are cultural, religious or ethnic. None of them present any threat to the state or to Islam; they harbour no militant or extremist groups and generally lead peaceful and unobtrusive lives — the very softest of targets. Nevertheless, they continue to attract the bombers and killers who strike at their places of worship as they gather for prayer or a community event."

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