

Pakistan: Massacre of Minority Ahmadis

Attack on Hospital Treating Victims Shows How State Inaction Emboldens Extremists

(New York, June 1, 2010) – Pakistan’s federal and provincial governments should take immediate legal action against Islamist extremist groups responsible for threats and violence against the minority Ahmadiyya religious community, Human Rights Watch said today.

On May 28, 2010, extremist Islamist militants attacked two Ahmadiyya mosques in the central Pakistani city of Lahore with guns, grenades, and suicide bombs, killing 94 people and injuring well over a hundred. Twenty-seven people were killed at the Baitul Nur Mosque in the Model Town area of Lahore; 67 were killed at the Darul Zikr mosque in the suburb of Garhi Shahu. The Punjabi Taliban, a local affiliate of the Pakistani Taliban, called the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), claimed responsibility.

On the night of May 31, unidentified gunmen attacked the Intensive Care Unit of Lahore’s Jinnah Hospital, where victims and one of the alleged attackers in Friday’s attacks were under treatment, sparking a shootout in which at least a further 12 people, mostly police officers and hospital staff, were killed. The assailants succeeded in escaping.

“The mosque attacks and the subsequent attack on the hospital, amid rising sectarian violence, underscore the vulnerability of the Ahmadi community,” said Ali Dayan Hasan, senior South Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The government’s failure to address religious persecution by Islamist groups effectively enables such atrocities.”

The US Department of State annual report on human rights recorded the killing of 11 Ahmadis for their faith in 2009.

Human Rights Watch called on Pakistan’s government to immediately introduce legislation in parliament to repeal laws discriminating against religious minorities such as the Ahmadis, including the penal statute that makes capital punishment mandatory for “blasphemy.”

Human Rights Watch also urged the government of Punjab province, controlled by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) party, to investigate and prosecute as appropriate campaigns of intimidation, threats, and violence against the Ahmadiyya community by Islamist groups such as the Sunni Tehrik, Tehrik-e-Tahafaz-e-Naomoos-e-Risalat, Khatm-e-Nabuwat and other groups acting under the Taliban’s umbrella. Leaders of these groups have frequently threatened to kill Ahmadis and attack the mosques where the killings took place. The anti-Ahmadiyya campaign has intensified in the past year, exemplified by the government allowing groups to place banners seeking the death of “Qadianis” (a derogatory term for Ahmadis) on the main thoroughfares of Lahore.

The independent, non-governmental Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and Ahmadi community leaders told Human Rights Watch that they had repeatedly brought these threats to the notice of Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, the provincial government, and the police controlled by the provincial authorities, and that they had asked for enhanced security for Ahmadiyya mosques given their vulnerability to attack. However, Human Rights Watch research found that the provincial government failed to act on the evidence or to ensure meaningful security to the mosques.

On May 30, Zaeem Qadri, advisor to Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, said in an interview on Dunya TV that the provincial government had failed to remove the threatening banners from the city’s thoroughfares in order to prevent “adverse reaction against the government” by the groups responsible. On the same day, a Taliban statement “congratulated” Pakistanis for the attacks, calling people from the Ahmadiyya and Shia communities “the enemies of Islam and common people” and urging Pakistanis to take the “initiative” and kill every such person “in range.”

“The Punjab government is either in denial about threats to Ahmadis and other minorities or is following a policy of willful discrimination,” said Hasan. “The Punjab government’s law enforcement authorities need to dispense with traditional prejudices and proactively protect heterodox communities like the Ahmadis, who now are in clear and serious danger from both the Taliban and sectarian militant groups historically supported by the state.”

Founded in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the Ahmadiyya community is a religious group that identifies itself as Muslim. Estimates suggest at least two million Ahmadis live in Pakistan. Ahmadis differ with other Muslims over the exact definition of Prophet Mohammad being the “final” monotheist prophet. Many Muslims consider the Ahmadiyya to be non-Muslims.

The persecution of the Ahmadiyya community is wholly legalized, even encouraged, by the Pakistani government. Pakistan’s penal code explicitly discriminates against religious minorities and targets Ahmadis in particular by prohibiting them from “indirectly or directly posing as a Muslim.” Ahmadis are prohibited from declaring or propagating their faith publicly, building mosques or even referring to them as such, or making the call for Muslim prayer.

Pakistan’s “Blasphemy Law,” as section 295-C of the Penal Code is known, makes the death penalty mandatory for blasphemy. Under this law, the Ahmadiyya belief in the prophethood of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad is considered blasphemous insofar as it “defiles the name of Prophet Muhammad.” In 2009, at least 50 Ahmadis were charged under various provisions of the blasphemy law across Pakistan. Many of these individuals remain imprisoned.

Since the military government of Gen. Zia-ul-Haq unleashed a wave of persecution in the 1980s, violence against the Ahmadiyya community has never really ceased. Ahmadis continue to be killed and injured, and have their homes and businesses burned down in anti-Ahmadi attacks. The authorities continue to arrest, jail and charge Ahmadis for blasphemy and other offenses because of their religious beliefs. In several instances, the police have been complicit in harassment and the framing of false charges against Ahmadis, or stood by in the face of anti-Ahmadi violence.

“Ahmadis unfortunately become easy targets in times of religious and political insecurity,” said Hasan. “The Pakistani government has emboldened the extremists by failing to take action. It needs to repeal the laws used to persecute Ahmadis, and it must prosecute those responsible for anti-Ahmadi intimidation and violence.”

However, the government seldom brings charges against perpetrators of anti-Ahmadi violence and discrimination. Research by Human Rights Watch indicates that the police have failed to apprehend anyone implicated in such activity in the last several years.

Since 2000, an estimated 400 Ahmadis have been formally charged in criminal cases, including blasphemy. Several have been convicted and face life imprisonment or death sentences pending appeal. The offenses charged included wearing an Islamic slogan on a shirt, planning to build an Ahmadi mosque in Lahore, and distributing Ahmadi literature in a public square. As a result, thousands of Ahmadis have fled Pakistan to seek asylum in countries including Canada and the United States.

Human Rights Watch said that the Pakistani government continues to actively encourage legal and procedural discrimination against Ahmadis. For example, all Pakistani Muslim citizens applying for passports are obliged to sign a statement explicitly stating that they consider the founder of the Ahmadi community an “imposter” and consider Ahmadis to be non-Muslims.

“Under Pakistan’s Blasphemy Law, virtually any public act of worship or devotion by an Ahmadi can be treated as a criminal offense,” said Hasan “Ahmadis could be sentenced to death for simply professing their faith.”

Human Rights Watch urged concerned governments and inter-governmental bodies to press the Pakistani government to:

- Repeal the Blasphemy Law;
- Prosecute those responsible for harassing, and planning and executing attacks against the Ahmadiyya and other minorities; and
- Take steps to encourage religious tolerance within Pakistani society.

“Pakistan’s continued use of its blasphemy law against Ahmadis and other religious minorities is despicable,” said Hasan. “As long as such laws remain on the books, Pakistan will remain a laboratory for abuse in the name of religion.”

Background on the Ahmadiyya community

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, the official name of the community, is a contemporary messianic movement founded in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1839–1908), who was born in the Punjabi village of Qadian, now in India. The relevant discriminatory laws in the Pakistani constitution and extremist Islamist groups derogatorily refer to the Ahmadiyya community as the “Qadiani” community, a term derived from the birthplace of the founder of the movement. In 1889, Ahmad declared that he had received divine revelation authorizing him to accept the baya’ah, or allegiance of the faithful. In 1891, he claimed to be the expected mahdi or messiah of the latter days, the “Awaited One” of the monotheist community of religions, and the messiah foretold by the Prophet Mohammed. Ahmad described his teachings, incorporating both Sufi and orthodox Islamic and Christian elements, as an attempt to revitalize Islam in the face of the British Raj, proselytizing Protestant Christianity, and resurgent Hinduism. Thus, the Ahmadiyya community believes that Ahmad conceived the community as a revivalist movement within Islam and not as a new religion.

Members of the Ahmadiyya community (“Ahmadis”) profess to be Muslims. They contend that Ahmad meant to revive the true spirit and message of Islam that the Prophet Mohammed introduced and preached. Virtually all mainstream Muslim sects believe that Ahmad proclaimed himself as a prophet, thereby rejecting a fundamental tenet of Islam: Khatme Nabuwat (literally, the belief in the “finality of prophethood” – that the Prophet Mohammed was the last of the line of prophets leading back through Jesus, Moses, and Abraham). Ahmadis respond that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was a non-law-bearing prophet subordinate in status to Prophet Mohammed; he came to illuminate and reform Islam, as predicted by Prophet Mohammed. For Ahmad and his followers, the Arabic Khatme Nabuwat does not refer to the finality of prophethood in a literal sense – that is, to prophethood’s chronological cessation – but rather to its culmination and exemplification in the Prophet Mohammed. Ahmadis believe that “finality” in a chronological sense is a worldly concept, whereas “finality” in a metaphoric sense carries much more spiritual significance.

The exact size of the Ahmadiyya community worldwide is unclear, but estimates suggest they number under 10 million, mostly concentrated in India and Pakistan but also present in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Gambia, Europe, and North America.

Background on persecution of the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan

The Ahmadiyya community has long been persecuted in Pakistan. Since 1953, when the first post-independence anti-Ahmadiyya riots broke out, the relatively small Ahmadi community in Pakistan has lived under threat. Between 1953 and 1973, this persecution was sporadic but, in 1974, a new wave of anti-Ahmadi disturbances spread across Pakistan. In response, Pakistan’s parliament introduced amendments to the constitution which defined the term “Muslim” in the Pakistani context and listed groups that were deemed to be non-Muslim under Pakistani law. Put into effect on September 6, 1974, the amendment explicitly deprived Ahmadis of their identity as Muslims.

In 1984, Pakistan’s penal code was amended yet again. As a result of these amendments, five ordinances that explicitly targeted religious minorities acquired legal status: a law against blasphemy; a law punishing the defiling of the Quran; a prohibition against insulting the wives, family, or companions of the Prophet of Islam; and two laws specifically restricting the activities of Ahmadis. On April 26, 1984, Gen. Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq issued these last two laws as part of Martial Law Ordinance XX, which amended Pakistan’s Penal Code, sections 298-B and 298-C.

Ordinance XX undercut the activities of religious minorities generally, but struck at Ahmadis in particular by prohibiting them from “indirectly or directly posing as a Muslim.” Ahmadis thus could no longer profess their faith, either orally or in writing. Pakistani police destroyed Ahmadi translations of and commentaries on the Quran and banned Ahmadi publications, the use of any Islamic terminology on Ahmadi wedding invitations, the offering of Ahmadi funeral prayers, and the displaying of the Kalima (the statement that “there is no god but Allah, Mohammed is Allah’s prophet,” the principal creed of Muslims) on Ahmadi gravestones. In addition, Ordinance XX prohibited Ahmadis from declaring their faith publicly, propagating their faith, building mosques, or making the call for Muslim prayer. In short, virtually any public act of worship or devotion by an Ahmadi could be treated as a criminal offense.

With the passage of the Criminal Law Act of 1986, parliament added section 295-C to the Pakistan Penal Code. The "Blasphemy Law," as it came to be known, made the death penalty mandatory for blasphemy. General Zia-ul-Haq and his military government institutionalized the persecution of Ahmadis as well as other minorities in Pakistan with section 295-C. The Ahmadi belief in the prophethood of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was now considered blasphemous insofar as it "defiled the name of Prophet Muhammad." Therefore, theoretically, Ahmadis could be sentenced to death for simply professing their faith. Though the numbers vary from year to year, Ahmadis have been charged every year under the Blasphemy laws since their introduction.

In 2009, at least 37 Ahmadis were charged under the general provisions of the Blasphemy Law and over 50 were charged under Ahmadi-specific provisions of the law. For example, in January 2009, five Ahmadis, including four children, were charged with blasphemy in Layyah district of Punjab province. The children were released after being jailed for six months. In July 2009, activists of the Sunni Tehreek, a militant group, staged protests until the local police in Faisalabad district of Punjab province agreed to register blasphemy cases against 32 Ahmadis for writing Quranic verses on the outer walls of their houses. The police registered cases against them under sections 295-A and 295-C. Throughout 2009, Ahmadi graveyards were threatened with desecration, and Ahmadi mosques continued to receive threats. In 2008, at least 15 Ahmadis were charged under various provisions of the Blasphemy Law. In addition to blasphemy charges, Ahmadis have sporadically come under physical attack. For example, in June 2006, a mob burned down Ahmadi shops and homes in Jhando Sahi village near the town of Daska in Punjab province, forcing more than 100 Ahmadis to flee. The police, though present at the scene, failed to intervene or arrest any of the culprits. However, the authorities charged seven Ahmadis under the blasphemy law. The Ahmadis subsequently returned to their homes. In October 2005, masked gunmen attacked Ahmadi worshippers in a mosque in the near the town of Mandi Bahauddin in Punjab province. Eight Ahmadis were killed and 18 injured in the attack. The perpetrators remain at large.