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Written statement* submitted by European Centre for Law and Justice, The / Centre Européen pour le droit, les Justice et les droits de l'homme, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[23 August 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

REQUEST THAT THE U.N. URGE PAKISTAN TO STOP VIOLENT MOBS ATTACKING CHRISTIANS

I. INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is ranked as the seventh worst country in the world for persecution of Christians(1) due to false allegations and prosecution under blasphemy laws, violent mob attacks on the Christian community over false allegations of blasphemy, forced religious conversion of young Christian girls and women to Islam, and violence against Christians due to minor disputes with the Muslim majority. Through our affiliate office in Pakistan, the European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) has firsthand information of such discrimination and persecution.

II. BACKGROUND

Blasphemy laws continue to wreak havoc in Pakistan. In addition to numerous innocent Christians being either on death row or serving life sentences under trumped up charges of insulting the Prophet Muhammad or desecrating the Quran, violent Muslim mobs attack and destroy Christian churches, homes, and murder innocent citizens with impunity. People often manufacture false evidence and make false accusations of blasphemy to settle personal scores.

Sadly, instead of condemning such laws and actions, the Human Rights Council condoned these laws by passing a resolution during its previous session. The Council adopted a resolution presented by Pakistan on behalf of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) condemning the Quran burning incident in Sweden, thereby giving its blessing to the laws that provide severe punishments for desecrating the Quran or any speech deemed to be insulting to Islamic prophets. Ironically, while Pakistan, a country that vigorously presented the resolution on behalf of the OIC and wants to hold people accountable who burn the Quran in foreign countries, has been either unwilling or unable to stop violent mobs who attack churches and desecrate Bibles in its own jurisdiction.

III. VIOLATIONS

In light of the recently adopted resolution against the Quran burning incident in Sweden, this Council should be doubly concerned about the situation in Pakistan. On August 16, 2023, angry Muslim mobs in Pakistan attacked and burned down several Christian churches and desecrated the Bibles in Jaranwala, Faisalabad, after accusing two Christian brothers of desecrating the Quran and of blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad.

Videos circulated on social media showed announcements from mosques inciting Muslims. After hearing the announcements, thousands of Muslims gathered at a mosque near Cinema Chowk and then attacked multiple churches and Christian homes. Hundreds of Christians fled their homes for their lives. Over twenty churches and eighty homes were vandalized and burned down.

Pictures and videos widely circulated showed the mob chanting slogans and setting the churches on fire. In one video, a man is seen making an announcement over a loudspeaker, "Christians from a nearby Christian neighborhood had desecrated the Quran. All Muslims and Muslim clerics should gather at the mosque. You are eating your breakfast. What kind of Muslims are you? . . ."

Another video shows a man inciting the gathered mob and the mob chanting slogans. A third video shows a police officer trying to calm the mob down, stating he had ordered the arrest of the Christians accused of desecrating the Quran, they would be arrested, and the court would punish them. The mob responded in disagreement: "We will punish them."

Instead of controlling the mob, the policemen at the scene are seen in the pictures and videos taking no action. Further, the police filed a report against Raja Amir Saleem and Rocky Saleem, the Christian brothers who were accused of desecrating the Quran.

This was not an isolated incident. Over the past three decades, many churches and Christian neighborhoods have been attacked and destroyed, and dozens of people have been murdered over false allegations of blasphemy in Pakistan. In 2009, a mob of Muslims murdered eight Christians in Gojra during an attack on a Christian village. In addition, the mob burned down hundreds of Christian homes. In 2013, another mob attacked and burned down over 100 Christian homes in Joseph Colony, Lahore, after a local Christian was falsely accused of blasphemy. No one has been punished for those attacks.

The ECLJ's affiliate in Pakistan is currently representing two Christians facing execution by hanging on false accusations of blasphemy. The ECLJ has raised these two cases before this Council numerous times, especially the case of Shahzad Masih, who was just 16 years old when he was first arrested in July 2017 over a false allegation of blasphemy.

Shahzad was wrongfully tried as an adult and was sentenced to death even though the accusation leveled against Shahzad did not constitute blasphemy. During a religious conversation with his Muslim colleague, which the Muslim colleague initiated, Shahzad told him that his father's Muslim friend, Ali, blasphemes when he hears anyone's name that has Muhammad in it.

The colleague was offended, and he told other Muslims about the conversation. Shahzad was summoned to a mobile phone shop where dozens of Muslims from an Islamic fundamentalist group were present. They asked Shahzad what he had told his Muslim colleague. Shahzad told them that his father's friend, Ali, blasphemes. Instead of accusing his father's friend, the angry mob handed Shahzad over to the police. A blasphemy case was registered against Shahzad, and he was formally charged.

Shahzad's trial took more than five years, after which the court sentenced him to death by hanging. In a video available on Youtube, a local Muslim cleric stated that men from his religious group, Tehreek-e-Tahafuz-e-Islam (TTIP) would kill Shahzad if the court did not punish him. Indeed, Shahzad was convicted without any evidence that he committed the crime. All the witnesses testified that Shahzad told a Muslim co-worker that his father's friend passes derogatory remarks against the Prophet Muhammad. This did not constitute blasphemy on Shahzad's part. Even the investigating officer stated that an eyewitness did not observe any insult against the Prophet in Shahzad's conversation. He further testified that Shahzad was not guilty of any crime. Nonetheless, the trial court convicted him. This innocent young man spent more than five years in prison fearing a conviction and is now waiting for the Lahore High Court to hear his appeal. Such is the level of false accusations that instigate Muslim mobs who attack innocent Christians, kill them, and destroy their homes and places of worship.

In another blasphemy case, the ECLJ's affiliate represents one of the two defendants, Amoon Ayub. In June 2011, Amoon and his brother, Qaiser Ayub, were accused of posting blasphemous content on the internet. Their accuser, a Muslim man, was surfing on the internet when he came across a website that contained blasphemous content. The website's homepage had the Ayub brothers' names, contact information, and address. Based on this information, and without inquiring who created the website and why anyone would post his own name and contact information on such a website in Pakistan, the police registered a case against the Ayub brothers. Both were arrested and faced trial.

In December 2018, the trial court convicted them to death by hanging. The court erroneously reasoned that the presence of the Ayub brothers' contact information on the blasphemous website clearly led to the conclusion that they were responsible for creating the website. Based on similar erroneous reasoning, on June 8, 2022, the Lahore High Court's bench in Rawalpindi upheld their death sentence. The Ayub brothers are now waiting for the Supreme Court of Pakistan to hear their appeal.

IV. REQUEST

Over three decades of prosecutions under blasphemy laws have created an atmosphere of intolerance for any religion other than Sunni Islam in Pakistan. While in the past UN bodies have repeatedly stated that blasphemy laws are in contravention to the rights to the freedom of religion and speech provided under the ICCPR and UDHR, the recent adoption at the HRC of the resolution condemning the Quran burning incident effectively contradicts the UN's prior position.

We ask that Pakistani authorities protect Christian churches, Bibles, and innocent Christians with the same vigor as they protect the Quran. Churches and Bibles, like other holy books and places of worship, are no less worthy of respect and protection. We ask that Pakistan punish the perpetrators who burn churches and Bibles with the same vigor that it seeks to punish someone who burns the Quran. We also ask that Pakistan punish those who instigate and participate in violence against innocent Christians over blasphemy accusations.

(1) World Watch List 2023, OPEN DOORS, <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/> (last visited May 23, 2023).