In Pakistan, a group of Muslim radicals shot a church and houses of Christians with machine guns



Radical Muslims in an area of Lahore, Pakistan on Monday (Sept. 6) fired high-powered weapons at the homes of Christians, wounding a pregnant woman and at least three other people, sources said.

A wounded Christian resident in the Shamsabad locality of Lahore's Sherakot area, Asif Masih, said he heard shouts followed by bursts of gunfire fr om fully automatic assault rifles after he returned home from work that afternoon.

"When I was telling my kids to get inside, I saw a group of heavily armed men firing indiscriminately at a church located on the street," Masih told Morning Star News. "They then trained their weapons on the homes of neighboring Christians and fired volleys of bullets at them."

Gunmen eyeing him opened fire on him, wounding him in both thighs, he said.

"I barely managed to drag myself into my house and locked the gate, but they did not stop firing," Masih

said. “I could hear them shouting that they would not spare Christians living in the area and would also burn down our church.”

The assailants, identified as Dilshad Dogar, Butt Gas Wala and Chand Khencha, fired hundreds of bullets from Kalashnikov (AK-47) rifles and other weapons into homes in the area wh ere more than 300 Christian families live, he said. Bullets pierced the gates of several homes, wounding three women identified as Nirma Bibi, Maria Kashif and Samina, and other Christians, he said.

“One of the injured women is six months pregnant,” Masih said. “She was hit in the leg by one of the several bullets fired at their gate, but fortunately her family members were able to secure her inside.”

Many people called the police emergency helpline after the shooting started at 2:30 p.m., but officers did not arrive until 8 p.m., he said, adding that local police have been lax in prosecuting the suspects as they were influential people. Masih was one of the complainants in the case against the gunmen.

“Our entire street has been riddled with bullets, and people have been injured, but the police have not included the sections related to terrorism in the FIR [First Information Report],” he said. “Moreover, I had stated in my application to the police that the accused had continuously threatened to burn the church and harm us, but even these facts were missing in the formal FIR.”

Registered the day after the attack, the FIR states that it arose out of a dispute between a Christian, Asghar Masih, and Dogar. Asif Masih denied the police version, saying officers were trying to protect the suspects.

“Ask them why Dogar and his accomplices opened fire on the homes of Christians and injured innocent people like us if they had just a personal dispute with an individual?” he said. “The police have been protecting the accused since day one because they are Muslims, and we are poor Christians.”

Attorney Javed Gill, a senior leader of the Christian Lawyers Association of Pakistan, said there were conflicting reports about the motives for the shooting.

“Several residents have claimed that the accused were opposed to the presence of a church in the locality and had been pressuring them to stop worship there, while some are saying that the incident was an outcome of a dispute over a girl,” Gill told Morning Star News.

“Nonetheless, even if it was a dispute between two people, how can anyone justify the targeting of the entire Christian neighborhood with automatic weapons?”

Several hundred bullets were fired from various illegal weapons resulting in injuries, yet police failed to include Section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act in the FIR, which would have made the attack a non-bailable offense, he said. Gill said police were also unable to explain why they did not intervene timely while gunmen were shooting innocent people and damaging property.

“Thank God no one lost their life in the gruesome attack, but the manner in which the accused acted shows that they would not have desisted from murdering any person who came in their way,” he said.

Muhammad Azeem, station house officer of the Sherakot police station, declined to comment on whether officers were protecting the suspects and could not explain why they were delayed in reaching the site.

“We have arrested three men while raids are being conducted to arrest the other accused,” he said, sidestepping the question about the delay.

He also had no comment on why anti-terrorism sections were not included in the FIR when high-powered weapons resulted in injuries and kept panic-stricken people locked in their homes.

Asked why police failed to include in the FIR the anti-Christian comments the suspects made as stated by the complainants, Azeem said only that the case was registered on Tuesday (Sept. 7), “because we wanted to get to the bottom of the issue.” He said preliminary investigation showed the shooting was rooted in a personal dispute, but “further investigation will reveal the facts.”

“They [Christians] are our brothers, and we will protect them from any element who wants to disrupt peace in the area,” he said. “The incident has been noticed by the government, and all efforts are being made to bring the culprits to justice. It is not a religious issue as is being projected by the Christians.”

The U.S. State Department in December re-designated Pakistan among nine other “Countries of Particular Concern” for severe violations of religious freedom. Previously Pakistan had been added to the list on Nov. 28, 2018.

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