

Oral Evidence to the Independent Review of the FCO Support for the Persecuted Christians

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Background

1. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan has consistently failed to safeguard the lives, properties and rights of its Christian citizens. The Christians have been marginalised, socially excluded, discriminated against and persecuted daily in so many different ways, for example; by ever-present threat of accusation of having committed blasphemy, abduction and forced conversion of females, mob attacks on their properties, presentation of their religion in a twisted and negative light in media and text books, their over representation among the bonded labour slaves, and discriminatory adverts confining them to degrading jobs.
2. In addition, the Christian minority has to suffer the wrath of Muslims for every little act against Islam committed by any westerner, anywhere in the world; for example a few years ago when Terry Jones burnt a Quran in the USA, the local fanatics attacked the Christians.
3. The ever present threats of intimidation and violence against the Christians means that they are not safe anywhere not even in normally safe places like hospitals. A few years ago, a Christian police officer was kicked to death by the medical staff in a hospital for daring to question the treatment of his sister by the doctors. (Annex 1)

Blasphemy Laws

4. Scores of Christians are still languishing in the country's jails, after having been accused of committing blasphemy, almost always falsely. The motives for false accusations vary and can include personal vendettas, professional rivalry, and the greed to take over a rival property or business. There are no proper safeguards to protect the accused, and the police and lower courts can be intimidated by the fanatical mobs into pronouncing the accused guilty. At the same time, it is appreciated that it is an emotive topic, and the government cannot always be blamed for the mob behaviour.
5. However, if the law cannot be amended at present, it must have built in safeguards to protect the accused's rights and provide natural justice. One such measure could be that in cases of false accusations, the accuser should face the same penalty which the accused would have suffered under these laws. This simple measure will dramatically reduce the number of false accusations, as at present anyone can accuse anyone else of having committed blasphemy and have their lives destroyed, without any fear of consequences.
6. In the sad case of Asia Bibi, the UK's refusal to provide her with sanctuary was incomprehensible. After all, the government had provided protection to Malala Yousafzai and Salman Rushdie, when they had been threatened by the extremists with similar mind sets. The government's abdication of its moral duty to provide protection to an obvious victim of persecution for so many years, will only encourage the extremists' demands; and the government's admonitions to other governments with much fewer resources and means to protect the persecuted individuals, will fall on deaf ears.

Discrimination in Schools

7. The Article 22 of the constitution of Pakistan guarantees that no child will be educated or forced to learn about the religion of any other community. However, the Islamic studies are compulsory for the Muslim students, and while non-Muslim students are supposed to be able to select 'Ethics' as an alternative; in practice, a lot of schools do not have the facilities available to teach this subject, and the Christian students end up studying Islamic studies.
8. Again, Article 25 of the Pakistani Constitution, declares that all citizens are equal before law. However a Hafiz Quran (recitor) is given 20 extra marks when applying to the professional institution, or tests for the Public Services Commission. No such facility is available to the non-Muslims, in violation of this article.
9. In the Pakistani schools text books, the minorities are often excluded, or their religion portrayed in negative light. An example of such biased material found in Khyber Pakhtoon Khwah Province's school books is attached (Annex 2)
10. The graduates of such discriminatory education eventually grow up into intolerant and bigoted individuals, some of them as teachers, who in turn overlook the discriminatory behaviour in their class rooms. The examples include an incident in 2017, where a student was kicked to death by his own class fellows for drinking water from a 'Muslim' cup, and the teacher stood by. (Annex 3).
11. This constant instillation of sense of superiority, taught to the Muslim children in the school environment, ultimately affects the West as well, in the sense that as the child grows up they automatically consider all the non-Muslims as inferior. If and when the child comes to the West and finds that the non-Muslims can be in authority, their mind set finds it difficult to comprehend, and occasionally that unsettled mind finds solace and confirmation of their views in extremism.
12. The discrimination against the minorities extends even into sending the students abroad on scholarships. A positive step for the British government to take would be to reserve a certain percentage of scholarships like Chevening Scholarships, offered to Pakistani students, for the minorities students.

Forced conversion and marriages

13. These follow a distinct pattern: young girls normally between the ages of 12-25 are abducted, converted to Islam, and married to the abductor. They usually come from the lowest strata of the society, which means that they are easy targets for the pedophiles and perpetrators of sexual violence. The law enforcing authorities are usually not interested in their plight. Even if against all odds, the parents manage to appeal to the courts, the victims are warned beforehand that they must state in the court that they voluntarily converted to Islam, otherwise, their families will be harmed. Thus, they make an extreme sacrifice and sign away their life, in order to save their families' lives.
14. In Islam, converting a non-Muslim to Islam is considered a holy deed and thus the abductor is often treated as a hero. The religious parties colour the attempts to retrieve the abductees, as a conspiracy against the glory of Islam. An attempt by the Sindh Assembly in 2017, to pass a law criminalising the forced conversion came to nothing, since a religious party, forced the Sindh Government to withdraw the bill. (Annex 4).

15. The recent abduction of a minor Christian girl Sadaf Masih, (13) from the home of her impoverished parents is a typical example of this. The police refused to help the parents initially and she still has not been recovered. (Annex 5)

16. A team in the High Commission already exists to rescue the British nationals who have been abducted or held against their will in Pakistan. That help could be extended to rescue the minorities' girls with extra funding provided, and with the help and co-operation of the Pakistani government..

Discriminatory Adverts

17. The Pakistani Government, unlike the British Government, has implicitly admitted the inherent discrimination, by reserving 5% employment quota in the government departments for the minorities. However, it has never been implemented properly. Even the government departments which do comply with the law, sometimes place all the minorities' vacancies under the most demeaning jobs such as lavatory cleaners and sweepers. (Annex 6). Sometimes, it seems like this vulnerable and downtrodden community is deliberately humiliated and villified for no other reason than to rub their noses in the dirt.

Recommendations

- The FCO should appoint an officer dealing with the religious persecution issues in the embassies where religious persecution is particularly rife, like Pakistan.
- The UK Government should work with the Pakistani authorities to build in safe guards for persons accused of having committed blasphemy, for example a false accuser should face the same penalty, as the accused would have faced under the law.
- The UK Government should target a part of their aid in Pakistan to uplift the Christians; as by following their stated policy of 'need not creed' and not discriminating on grounds of religion, they are unintentionally responsible for perpetuating the discrimination against the Christians.
- The UK Government should make the aid to Pakistan conditional on improvements in treatment of minorities, for example the education assistance should depend on the removal of all the discriminatory material in the text books, in order to foster a more inclusive and cohesive society.
- The UK Government should reserve a certain percentage of scholarships offered to the Pakistani students like the Chevening Scholarships, for the students from the Christian minority background.
- The team rescuing the British nationals in Pakistan with its expertise in the British High Commission, should be extended to recover the minorities girls particularly the minor girls who have been abducted, forcibly converted and illegally married, in co-operation with the Pakistani government.
- The FCO should support the Government of Pakistan in creating an independent Commission for the Minorities Rights, based on the Paris Principles, with the powers

of a court, to hear the complaints, as well as examine the planned legislation for its effect on the minorities.

Annexes

Annex 1 - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Christian-man-beaten-to-death-by-doctors-in-Lahore-for-defending-his-pregnant-sister-43491.html>

Annex2-

<https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Teaching%20Intolerance%20in%20Pakistan.pdf>
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Annex 3 - https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/en/2017/09/18/news/pakistan-when-christians-die-for-a-glass-of-water-1.34421819?refresh_ce

Annex4 - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Sindh-rejects-law-against-forced-conversions,-a-big-disappointment-for-Christians-and-Hindus-39607.html>

Annex 5 - <http://www.pakistanchristianpost.com/head-line-news-details/7047>

Annex 6 - <http://www.pakistanjobbank.com/Jobs/55343/Khakroob-Jobs-in-Karachi-Metropolitan-Corporation-2019-March-KMC-Latest/>