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Pakistan: government should take concrete action to amend or abolish the blasphemy laws within a year

As Pakistan marks Minorities Day, Amnesty International calls on the government to take meaningful action to protect religious minorities which have increasingly been the target of religiously-motivated attacks and persecution.

The rise in attacks against religious minorities comes against a backdrop - and in tandem - with rising religious extremism in the country. Amnesty International is concerned at the discrimination, harassment and attacks against all religious minorities, including Ahmadis, Christians, Shiite, Sikhs and Hindus, that are widespread in Pakistan.

Amnesty International welcomes Prime Minister Gilani's announcement that the government would set up a committee to review and improve "laws detrimental to religious harmony." The Prime Minister's statement comes in the wake of the Gorja attack which flared up over allegations of blasphemy. Though not explicitly stating which laws would be reviewed, his statement alluded to the country's blasphemy laws introduced in 1982 and 1986 by military leader Zia ul-Haq in attempt to use Islam to promote popular appeal for his military regime.

Attacks on religious minorities have been exacerbated by Pakistan's blasphemy laws which have fostered a climate of religiously-motivated violence and persecution. Accusations of blasphemy have frequently resulted in the murder of both Muslims and members of religious minorities.

The blasphemy laws, while purporting to protect Islam and religious sensitivities of the Muslim majority, are vaguely formulated and arbitrarily enforced by the police and judiciary in a way which amounts to harassment and persecution of religious minorities. In January this year, five Ahmadis, including one minor, were detained on spurious charges of blasphemy in the Layyah district, with no evidence or witnesses to support the charges against them.

Evidence from Amnesty International and other human rights groups suggests that charges brought against individuals under the blasphemy laws are founded solely on the individuals' minority religious beliefs or unfounded malicious accusations stemming from personal enmity, often with the motivation to have people imprisoned to gain advantage in business or land disputes. Police frequently fail to record and investigate complaints and justice is impeded by the biased attitude of some judges against religious minorities.

Amnesty International urges the government of Pakistan to amend or abolish the blasphemy laws, particularly section 295C of the Pakistan Penal Code which carries a mandatory death penalty for anyone found guilty of blasphemy. The organization calls on the Pakistan government to guarantee the human rights of minorities laid down in the Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, notably Article 18 which provides that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion."

The organization also calls Pakistan government to put into law and practice anti-discrimination measure on the grounds of religion. To this end, the Pakistan government

should introduce a comprehensive education programme, at all levels of society, which promotes equality and respect for the diversity of beliefs in Pakistan.

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