

CLAAS' submission

For All Party Parliamentarian Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief

On

Suffering of Christians in Pakistan

Introduction of CLAAS:

CLAAS is a non-denominational Christian organisation based in the UK and Pakistan. CLAAS' main aims and objectives are to support suffering Christians in Pakistan, and elsewhere, to defend their rights and to promote basic human rights and freedom of religion as described in the UN universal declaration of human rights.

Prevailing situation:

Pakistan is a predominately Muslim country with a total population of 189,870,00 of which 96% is Muslim, and 4% religious minorities. Christians supported the Quaid e Azam in his struggle for Pakistan and he made it clear in his first presidential speech that religion will have nothing to do with the business of state, and all Pakistanis regardless of their race, religion and creed will be equal citizens. Unfortunately, after his death his successors lost his vision and made minorities 2nd class citizens of the country. Even after 68 years they are still not considered equal citizens and they are constitutionally barred from becoming president or prime minister of Pakistan.

Christians are suffering in all walks of life – in politics, education, economically and socially - because of several discriminatory laws and government policies. They are looked upon with hatred and as inferior to Muslims. The situation against Christians started worsening when General Zia Ul Haq started the process of islamisation and introduced several ordinances and laws, including the separate electoral system, and the most draconian and controversial blasphemy law, which Christians consider the root cause of their persecution.

The blasphemy law is being widely misused against minorities — a fact that has been admitted by the media and politicians alike. Sadly, even after so much tumult and bloodshed, the government has failed to take appropriate action to stop the ongoing misuse of the blasphemy law and ensure security and protection for Christians. Those who speak against the blasphemy law are either killed or silenced by extremists groups. At least four churches, two schools and three colonies have been attacked in the recent year.

Several people have been falsely charged and sentenced to death, including Zaffar Bhatti, [Shaguftah and her husband, Shafqat](#) and [Sawan Masih](#). Shama and Shahzad were burnt alive in a brick kiln furnace where they once worked, Aasia Bibi's appeal still is set to be heard by the Supreme Court. Dozens of Christians accused of committing blasphemy have been burnt alive, killed by mobs, and even by the police and prison authorities.

The Pakistani government seems oblivious to this growing situation, but the Supreme Court of Pakistan seems concerned and determined about addressing the minorities' situation. Last June the then chief justice of Pakistan, Tassaduq Hussain Jilani, ordered the formation of a special task force to protect minorities' places of worship and also ordered the formation of a national council of minorities' rights to monitor the practical realisation of the rights and safeguards provided to minorities under the Constitution and law. Although the supreme court is pursuing the implementation of this order, the Government is not paying much attention.

Unfortunately when an individual is accused of committing blasphemy, the whole community comes under attack, as we have seen in the cases of Sawan Masih, when [Joseph colony](#) was set on fire in March 2013. In May this year when Christian Humayun Faisal was accused of blasphemy, his town [Sandha Dhup Sarri](#) was attacked. And who can forget the attack on Shantinagar and [Gojra, where 8 Christians](#) were burnt alive. Nobody has been brought to justice.

In April 14-year-old [Nauman Masih](#), was burnt alive by some young Muslims after he was identified as Christian.

Religious intolerance and hatred against Christians continues to rise. They are living under constant fear for their lives, and are disappointed and desperate because of the ongoing situation against them and the government's apathy. As a result, many have fled Pakistan.

Recently I had the chance to meet the [Rev Dr Robinson Asghar](#), a very influential and prominent Pakistani Christian. He fled Pakistan and has applied for asylum in the UK. His brother is a colonel in the Pakistani army, and he himself is ex PAF (Pakistan Air Force) pilot. He was running his own church in Rawalpindi, but land mafia registered a false case against him to grab the church property to build a commercial plaza. He was kidnapped but freed later because of interference from high ranking politicians.

One of my friend's [David Ifran, a journalist](#) by profession, has been running his own Christian magazine, Saawan, since 1989. He fled Pakistan he received death threats for publishing some literature which was not liked by the Islamists.

I am also aware of the case of a female Christian singer, who fled Pakistan because her colleagues were pressuring her to convert to Islam.

A few years back I met a married couple – both doctors (I cannot mention their names). The wife was by born Christian, while the husband was from a Muslim background but converted to Christianity. [CLAAS](#) has been looking after them since they were in Pakistan and needed shelter. They faced a real threat to their lives, but it took the home office years to believe their story.

Christian [ex-MP, Saleem Khokhar](#) is another example of someone who fled Pakistan to save his life and has now been granted asylum in the UK.

These are all real stories according to the best of my knowledge. The government of Pakistan failed to protect and guarantee them security and so they were forced to flee Pakistan.

Forced conversion, kidnapping, [rape](#) and forced marriages of Christian girls is becoming a common thing. In such cases the police and courts both become biased. The police try their best not to register cases against Muslim kidnappers when it comes to matters of religion. [Courts](#) also become biased and bring Sharia laws in such cases while Islamic laws do not apply to non-Muslims.

The majority of the Christian women are illiterate and do menial jobs. Many young girls and women work as domestic servants and are treated like slaves. They are often sexually harassed and physically abused, and are sometimes killed, like teenager [Shaizia](#). Unfortunately the perpetrators are mostly influential and they are never punished.

Women working in factories and offices also face threats as Christians, and they are often asked to keep their utensils separate from the Muslims. They are often harassed and sometimes are asked to convert to Islam and marry Muslim men.

There are no firm numbers, but estimates of the number of incidents involving Christian girls has been said to be as low as 100 annually or as high as 700. It is estimated that about 300 Hindu girls are kidnapped and forced to convert every year.

CLAAS deals with several such cases every year and provides the victims with as much as possible, provides free legal aid and shelter.

Human rights violations continue to rise, despite the government of Pakistan being a signatory of several international treaties and conventions.

Home office policy:

Because of the nature of my work I often get chance to meet people who have fled Pakistan and have applied for asylum in the UK. They have several complaints about their treatment from the home office.

The majority of people coming from Pakistan, regardless of their education, prefer to speak in their mother tongue to the home office case worker/immigration officer through interpreters and most of the time, despite their request for a non-Muslim interpreter, they are ignored.

Since they have recently fled Pakistan where they have been suffering at the hands of the Muslims, it becomes a difficult situation for them. They get hesitant and most of the time they cannot speak freely and their full story is never told to the case worker. As a result, most of the cases are denied during their first interview.

Several people have told me that non-Christian interpreters often make mistakes especially in the matter of religious questions and answers, while some Muslims refuse to interpret answers like "Jesus is the son of God" etc or other things considered against their belief.

Most of the time home office case workers refuse to accept the supporting evidence documents, including church letters – I am not sure what recourse the home office uses for the verification. Christian asylum seekers get very upset when they are told they are not Christian even when they have provided evidence.

The home office asks very difficult Biblical questions which an ordinary Christian cannot answer. The majority of Pakistani Christians are poor and illiterate. In government and private Muslim schools all the students have to study Islamiyat (Islamic studies), and there are very few Christian schools that teach Christianity in their schools. So it cannot be assumed that every Christian has good knowledge of their religion.

Some churches in urban areas have the facility of Sunday schools, but some don't. Children going to Sunday schools have better knowledge of Christianity than those who do not have the facility of Sunday schools.

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3rd October 2015