



## Christians in Pakistan Subject to Violence

Since the suicide bombing attack at All Saints Church in Peshawar, Pakistan, on Sunday, September 22, Christians in Pakistan have lived in fear. The bombing killed 78 worshipers. After the attack, [PBS NewsHour](#) quoted a statement from Joseph Coutts, the Roman Catholic bishop of Karachi, Pakistan's commercial capital. "We always live in a state of tension," stated the bishop. "What's going to happen next and where is it going to happen?"



Peshawar is near the eastern end of the Khyber Pass through the mountains separating Pakistan from Afghanistan, making it a strategic hub and staging area for convoys transporting supplies to NATO forces fighting the Taliban. During the Afghani mujahideen war against the Soviets in the 1980s, Peshawar served as a center for the CIA and mujahideen to train and brief anti-Soviet fighters. It remains a prime stress point in the struggle between the Taliban and moderate Pakistanis.

NewsHour cited Bishop Coutts' observation that since Pakistanis associate Christians with the West, particularly the United States, Pakistani Christians make convenient targets for retaliation by Islamic militants.

The report noted that Pakistan's blasphemy law, which makes it a capital crime to insult the prophet Mohammed, is often used indiscriminately as a tool to attack one's enemies. Vigilante justice often precedes a day in court for those accused of violating the law.

"The news is spread in the neighborhood and most of these neighborhoods are either slums or rural areas and people come out wanting to lynch the accused," NewsHour quoted Roland de Souza, identified as a partner in a Karachi engineering firm, who is Catholic. "Even if he is rescued from this crowd by the police the police station is surrounded by people baying for his blood."

The British [Daily Telegraph](#) reported that among the 78 people killed in the church bombing were seven children, and six days after the blast, the pediatric ward of Peshawar's Lady Reading hospital was still full.

A reporter for the *Telegraph* interviewed a seven-year old boy, Shyam Emmanuel, who lost his parents in the bombing. Shyam told the reporter that he was with about 50 other children singing "The Good Shepherd" in the Sunday school across a courtyard from the church when their teacher sent him with his two brothers and friends to get rice and sweets being offered in memory of a popular parishioner who had died.

As the boys went down the steps into the courtyard, the two terrorists, described as uniformed men in their mid-twenties, struck. The bombers were wearing suicide vests that contained ball bearings serving as shrapnel.

Arif Latif, a male nurse at a local clinic who was in the church at the time, feared for his two children, a boy and a girl, who were also in the Sunday school. Though both survived, his son was badly burned and has shrapnel inside his body, which doctors believe damaged his liver.



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“We are not safe in Pakistan. This was the first time we suffered, but it was huge,” Latif told the reporter from his son’s bedside. “I just can’t explain how I feel. We have lost many friends, I’ve lost cousins, uncles, aunties. We’re confused and we just don’t know what to do.”

Among the visitors to the hospital ward on September 26 was local Bishop Humphrey Peters. “This has shaken the whole community,” Peters told the *Telegraph* relating the story of one little girl’s ordeal. “There was one little girl in big trauma and one of our people was trying to make the sign of the cross on her forehead. She said, ‘Don’t do it, because they will come and kill me.’ She is nine or ten years old.”

Beyond the physical injuries, Christian children have a difficult time in Pakistan, the bishop told the reporter.

“Christian children in government schools are not treated well. They call them sweepers and tell them they can’t eat with them or drink with them. Because we are marginalized and the poorest of the poor, the old Hindu caste system prevails,” said Peters. “Many of our people were once low caste [Hindus] so they’re treated as nothing at all. There is a psychological problem with the Christians, they become so timid and scared. They’re supposed to be very brave. But we are refugees in our own country ... like flies on the wall.”

The bishop also described an attack on a church in his diocese last year, in the city of Mardan: “They burnt the church, the Christian library, the priest’s house, almost the entire community. The police tried to stop them but there were 10,000 people. They were about to throw the priest’s son on to the fire but somehow he was rescued. They said they were throwing Obama into the fire. He was 16 or 17.”

Though it might be inconceivable to an American that anyone might associate a priest’s son with President Obama, that is a fact of life in Pakistan.

A report in Pakistan’s *Daily Times* on September 24 quoted Danish Yunas, identified as a Christian driver who was wounded while exchanging greetings after the church service when the bombers struck. “We had very good relations with the Muslims — there was no tension before that blast, but we fear that this is the beginning of a wave of violence against the Christians,” said Yunas.

The *Times* also reported that a faction linked to the Pakistani Taliban — the umbrella Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) group — had claimed responsibility for the attack after the bombing, saying it was performed to avenge U.S. drone strikes on Taliban and al-Qaeda operatives in Pakistan’s tribal areas along the Afghan border. However, the next day, the main spokesman for the TTP contradicted that claim and said they were not responsible. “We haven’t done this nor do we attack innocent people,” Shahidullah Shahid, the main TTP spokesman, told AFP by telephone from an undisclosed location. “Whenever we carry out an attack we claim it, but the Taliban are not involved in this attack. It was an attempt to sabotage the atmosphere of the proposed peace talks.”

Pakistan is not the only nation in the Islamic world where Christians are experiencing perilous times. A September 24 report from Fox News headlined, “[Kenya, Pakistan, Egypt — it is now open season on Christians](#),” provided details of other attacks.

The report noted that while the disputed Taliban statement claiming that the Peshawar bombing was retaliation for ongoing U.S. drone attacks, the bombers did not target Americans, but their fellow Pakistanis. The explanation, wrote the reporter, is:

For the Taliban and like-minded groups, the key factor is religion. The connections they make are



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not national, or ethnic, or geographic, but religious. Hence, since they regard America as Christian, they kill Christians.

The Fox report noted that religion was also a factor during the recent attacks by the Somali-based Al-Shabaab group at the shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, releasing those whom they could verify as Muslims, and killing those whom they could not. However, in that case, the non-Muslims were not necessarily Christians, but also included Chinese and Indians who likely were adherents of Asian faiths that were neither Muslim nor Christian.

Fox News called this “one of the most under-reported stories in the world — al-Shabab’s systematic effort to kill every Christian Somali that they can, even those in Kenya, on the grounds that they are converts from Islam. Like the Taliban, they try to identify their opponents by religion.”

While religion may be the litmus test that Taliban-linked extremists use to separate friend from foe, the actions prompting their outrage go beyond religion.

Former Representative and presidential candidate Ron Paul provided much insight about a key reason for resentment against the United States and the West among the Muslim world when he responded to candidate Rudy Giuliani during the 2008 Republican Presidential debate in South Carolina:

I believe very sincerely that the CIA is correct when they teach and talk about blowback. When we went into Iran in 1953 and installed the shah, yes, there was blowback. A reaction to that was the taking of our hostages and that persists. And if we ignore that, we ignore that at our own risk. If we think that we can do what we want around the world and not incite hatred, then we have a problem. They don’t come here to attack us because we’re rich and we’re free. They come and they attack us because we’re over there. I mean, what would we think if we were — if other foreign countries were doing that to us?

It is unfortunate that Christians in the Middle East may also become targets of that blowback, through no fault of their own.

*Photo of Pakistani Christians praying in a church: AP Images*



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