

COUNTRY PROFILE

PAKISTAN



The August 2023 mob attacks on Christians in the Punjab's Jaranwala district, resulting in the torching of more than 25 churches,¹⁸⁸ highlighted concerns about increasing persecution.¹⁸⁹ Research showed that “terrorist attacks targeting religious minorities and places of worship significantly increased” in 2023.¹⁹⁰ Christians suffered repeated harassment, false accusations, discrimination in the courts as well as in schools and the workplace. Anecdotal reports suggested a “rise in abductions, forced marriages and conversions of underage girls and young women” from Christian and other religious minority backgrounds.¹⁹¹

In August 2023, Pakistan's Senate passed a bill to increase sentences for derogatory remarks against revered personalities close to Islam's Prophet.¹⁹² Given the widespread abuse of blasphemy laws, the proposed legislation raised concerns. In March 2023 research showed that 2,120 individuals had been accused of blasphemy between 1987 and 2022, with increased abuse of related legislation over the period.¹⁹³ More than half of the cases involved minorities, despite them comprising 1.9 percent of the total population.

In January 2024 the federal government withdrew the requirement for non-Muslim students to study Islam. The Curriculum for Religious Education 2023 enabled minorities to “delve deeper into topics and contents relating to their religion”.¹⁹⁴ But human rights observers noted that “religious content against minorities” in curriculum and textbooks increased, posing “a number of perennial and new challenges... in the education system”.¹⁹⁵

As the “poorest of the poor”, Christians are especially susceptible to persecution.¹⁹⁶ Described as bonded labourers, Christians comprise 20 percent of brick-kiln workers, and in some places up to 80 percent.¹⁹⁷ Many of them are at mortal risk, lacking protective equipment.

SELECTED INCIDENTS

JANUARY 2023 UN experts expressed alarm at the reported rise in abductions and forced marriage and conversion of underage girls and young women from Christian and other religious minorities in Pakistan and urged immediate action to curtail its practice and implement justice for victims.¹⁹⁸

AUGUST 2023 More than 25 churches and 80 homes belonging to Christians were torched when a mob of thousands armed with high explosives and other weapons went on the rampage in the Punjab district of Jaranwala¹⁹⁹ (see case study on p. 35).

MARCH 2024 The United Presbyterian Church in Gujar Khan, near Islamabad, was gutted by fire the day before Easter. Police said the blaze was caused by a short circuit but 500 Christians gathered in front of the church calling on the authorities to investigate local businessman Sheikh Ahmad. The owner of an under-construction shopping centre, Mr Ahmad had objected to police tents and barricades erected in the area as part of Good Friday security arrangements.²⁰⁰

MAY-JUNE 2024 Christian grandfather Nazir Gill Masih, 73, from Sargodha, died from his injuries after being lynched by a mob of thousands. The mob accused Mr Masih of desecrating the *Qur'an*, and his home and shoe factory were torched. Reports suggested the incident was motivated by business rivalry and personal disputes. The violence triggered a mass exodus of Christians from the neighbourhood.²⁰¹