

CRY JUSTICE

CUE

Life has become harder and more dangerous for Christians in Pakistan since 9/11.

Islamic militants see the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as wars on Muslims – and they regard Pakistan’s Christians as agents of the United States.

Andrew Boyd of Release International – a Christian human rights organisation - has been talking to those caught up in the backlash of the Western war on terror...

In: ‘It was nine in the morning...’

Out: Fx – Singing ends

Dur: 8’41

Back anno: Andrew Boyd, from Release International, reporting.

SCRIPT

NARR

It was nine in the morning when the mosque loudspeakers broadcast the call to ‘Kill the American dogs’. By that afternoon 100 homes in Gojra would be looted, many destroyed and a family of Christians burnt alive.

Josefine Akhlas was at her parent’s house with her children. Had they stayed at home, they would have probably died, too... along with the seven who perished in the flames – all members of the same family. The youngest was just four.

The chemical the militants used to torch the house and its occupants burned fiercely. Josefine described what she saw when she reached the house...

JOSEFINE

My house was all burnt and all totally destroyed. And my husband was burnt alive and he was dead... We did nothing for which we were punished so cruelly.'

NARR

The authorities have rebuilt some of the homes destroyed by fire. But one house remains a burnt-out shell. A memorial to all – Muslims and Christians alike.

SOT

All in this room, all the people here died.

Narr

Clothes and belongings are strewn across the floor; the walls are charred; a blackened room is where the family met their deaths.

WALTER MASI H B-ROLL

Walter Masih lost his wife, Parveen and daughter, Asia, who was 30, in that fire. He tells his story with calm and quiet dignity, even as the loudspeakers that called for the attack now broadcast the Muslim call to prayer.

WALTER MASI H

'They started to set fire to the houses and opened fire with weapons. My eldest daughter was caught in the fire and did not come out. She was six months pregnant.'

'We are very scared. These people can attack again whenever they want. We can do nothing - only believe in Jesus. We have a strong trust in him.'

NARR

The rioting started two days before in neighbouring Korian, with a cry of blasphemy, as this report by Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan, explains:

SLMP NARR

A rumour began at a wedding in a nearby village when Muslims falsely accused Christians of desecrating pages from the Koran. This was the third attack on Christian villages because of such rumours. Some believe these were planned attacks against Christian minorities.

SINGING / NARR

These three men have all been accused of blasphemy. Release's partners are convinced that they are innocent, but their lives have been devastated - just because of the allegations made against them.

Walyat Masih, who can neither read nor write, was celebrating the life of a local Christian, who prayed for the sick. Some Muslims, who also loved this man, spread a special cloth over his grave. On it were words that Walyat could not read. They were the Islamic Kalimah – a declaration of faith.

Other Muslims cried blasphemy.

WALYAT MASI H

'I'm illiterate. I didn't know what was written on the sheet we were spreading on the grave. If the judge will find me guilty he may punish me with the death penalty or life imprisonment. But it's not my fault. I'm not guilty because I didn't know what it was.'

'They wanted to set fire to our houses and burn us alive.'

NARR

Naveed and Shafique Masih were also accused of blasphemy after Muslim

students found a Christian leaflet Naveed had taken to school. No charges were pressed but once the cry of blasphemy has rung out nothing can ever be the same. Shafique Masih...

SHAFIQUE MASIH

'We were receiving severe threats from the Muslims. They were saying we must embrace Islam. They tried to force us. They said very clearly that if we wanted to live here we should accept Islam or leave this place because they would burn our house.'

NARR

So the family of 16 had to abandon their home, their church, their work and move to another city. Even now Naveed is afraid.

Release and its partners are campaigning for justice for Christians under the Pakistan legal system.

Lawyer Tahir Gul Sadiq says there is a long history of crying blasphemy just to settle scores or dispose of rivals.

TAHIR GUL

'When you call the Muslim community, they just gather in a moment: "They desecrated the Holy Koran", or 'They've defamed the name of the Holy Prophet." This stirs them up, so they gather. They are ready to do anything. They are ready to give their lives. So that's why this law is abused.'

NARR

Tahir Gul believes 99 per cent of blasphemy charges are based on fictitious stories. Case after case is overturned on appeal. But militants and zealots have gunned down the Christians anyway.

TAHIR GUL

'Christians are discriminated [against] in every walk of life.'

NARR

Christian housemaids have been raped, abused - even murdered. Young women have been kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam. Katherine Sapna is a programme officer for a Release partner in Pakistan.

KATHERINE SAPNA

'We are dealing with all kinds of cases, like blasphemy, rape, forced conversion, and abduction - all discriminatory laws.'

'Release International is helping us financially, morally, and in the cases, whenever we need, they help us.'

NARR

Entire Christian families facing poverty sell themselves into bonded labour in brick kilns. Children of all ages work in the open air. One small boy sluices water, naked. They have to borrow to pay for health care, weddings and

funerals. Often they can never pay off their debt to the brick kiln owner. Many suffer from respiratory diseases. So doctor Sara Qadirbukhsah tends the sick free of charge.

DOCTOR

'Their work is mostly causing these problems, because there is a lot of dust. And because of the dust they are having respiratory infections and all these allergies.'

NARR

Legal partners of Release have fought in the courts to free more than 750 Christians from bonded labour. Standing up for justice in Pakistan requires courage and dedication. Katherine Sapna.

KATHERINE SAPNA B-ROLL

'I have a passion to help to poor Christians, because I am a believer and I want to help the believer of Jesus. So I choose this work. I know it is hard and risky, but I love Jesus because he's the saviour of the world.'

NARR

The Christians of Korian and Gojra may be attacked again. Encouraging them to stand firm in their faith is Pastor Khaliq Barkat, whose church was destroyed by rioters.

PASTOR KHALIQ BARKAT

'I pray for the Muslim attackers who destroy our houses. We cannot fight them, because Jesus said forgive your enemies. I would say to them: "Though you treat us badly, I forgive you in the name of Jesus."'

NARR

Walter Masih, whose wife and daughter were slaughtered by the militants, echoes those words:

WALTER MASIH

'We are the followers of Jesus. If he says forgive your enemies, then we forgive them.'

NARR

Through its partners in Pakistan, Release International is supporting Christians in court. It has given aid to more than 100 prisoners and their families, and relief for Christians who've been attacked by militants.

Last word to Walter Masih:

WALTER MASIH

'Pray for a change of heart for the Muslims. And for a strong Christian community.'

SINGING ENDS

ENDS

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