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Hindu minority lives in mounting fear

KARACHI, 6 January 2011 (IRIN) - In a private hospital in the port city of Karachi, a child has just been born. But rather than triggering joy among his family members, the birth has also led to bitter disputes.

The child's parents wish to give the baby boy a name which will not instantly identify him as Hindu. His maternal grandfather, Suresh Kapoor, 75, disagrees. "We must keep our traditions, our identity or we will be lost," he said. Other family elders support him but younger members argue safety is a key concern.

Hindus make up about 1.8 percent of Pakistan's predominantly Muslim population of 165 million, according to official figures. The largest number, about 95 percent, is concentrated in the southern province of Sindh. The Hindu population has declined over the years with more and more, according to media reports, opting to leave the country or become Muslim to avoid discrimination.

Discrimination against all minority communities has expanded rapidly, say observers. Early in November, Aasia Bibi, a young Christian mother of five, was sentenced to death by a court under controversial blasphemy laws. She became the first woman to be condemned to hang under the law. The case against her seemed to have been triggered by a minor dispute with other female farm labourers on the land she worked on, after they said she, as a non-Muslim, was 'impure' and could not fetch water from a well.

Human rights groups, including international rights watchdog Human Rights Watch, expressed shock and in an unusual move for a politician, the governor of the Punjab Province, Salman Taseer, went to visit Aasia in jail, expressed sympathy over her plight and criticized the blasphemy law.

In doing so, he may have written his own death sentence. Taseer was gunned down on 3 January in Islamabad by a police bodyguard who then turned himself in and said he had killed the governor as he had described the blasphemy law as a "black law".

"This is a terrible thing. Everyone should be free to practice their religion. The governor died for defending a poor Christian woman," Saleem Masih, 30, a Christian factory worker, told IRIN.

Concern has been expressed by human rights groups over increased violence against minorities. The secretary-general of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, I.A. Rehman, said: "This is the result of increased incitement of hatred by extremists and militants."

Hindus, regarded by many hardline Muslims as especially undesirable infidels since their belief does not include the idea of a single God, have faced especially tough times.

Kidnappings

"These days we Hindus live in fear and with a constant sense of insecurity," Amarnath Motumal, a

Hindu community leader and lawyer, told IRIN. He said one reason for this was the kidnapping of Hindu girls, who were then married to Muslim men and converted to Islam.

“We have no problem of course when a girl aged over 18 chooses to marry a Muslim of her own free will and converts [Islamic laws in force in the country make it mandatory for a Hindu to convert in order to marry a Muslim]. But these kidnappings involve girls who are much younger, and courts have upheld ‘marriages’ of this nature,” he said.

According to Motumal, 10-15 such abductions took place each month in the Lyari locality of Karachi alone. “Many more occur in rural areas of Sindh but not all families want to talk about them,” he said.

In other places kidnappings take place for other reasons. From the southwestern province of Balochistan there have been reports of Hindus being abducted in increasing numbers. Ransom has been sought in some cases, according to media reports.

Motumal believes, however, that in Balochistan, Hindus are being “picked up” by security forces, because they are perceived as backing nationalists in the province who are waging a struggle for autonomy.

“These persons are labelled as Indian agents backing nationalists, even though they have lived in Balochistan for generations and have no links with India,” Motumal said. (India is a Hindu majority country.)

Government ministers have accused neighbouring India, whose relations with Pakistan are tense, of fuelling unrest in Balochistan.

There has also been a spate of kidnappings of Hindu children, usually for ransom. According to a survey by the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPRC), a local NGO, 23 such abductions took place from between January 2008 and December 2010.

Salam Dharejo, SPRC’s national manager for child labour, believes the fact Hindu communities usually combine resources to pay the money demanded and rescue children makes them vulnerable to such crime.

Lack of trust in law enforcement

“The families of victims do not trust the police and are scared of the criminals as well,” Dharejo said. He told IRIN the kidnappings, and the torture of some of the abducted children, had terrorized the Hindu community. “The Hindus feel helpless. Children are being kept away from even the doors of their homes and in the Hindu locality of Kandhkot town all Hindu children are being kept away from school,” he said.

Ramesh Lala, a member of the National Assembly and a representative of Hindus, told IRIN: “This is the result of a worsening law and order situation in Sindh where kidnappings are becoming more and more frequent. It is not just Hindus who suffer.”

“Being a Hindu mother today is terrifying. I fear my 14-year-old daughter could be taken away, my

husband victimized as he sometimes openly speaks out in favour of his religion, or my younger children kidnapped. The police ignore us when we complain, so criminals target us,” said Asha Lal, 40. She said the growth of extremism and laws such as those on blasphemy “led to Hindus and other non-Muslims suffering”.

In May 2008 a Hindu factory worker was killed on blasphemy charges while a year later, Hindus came under attack in the town of Umerkot following another charge of blasphemy.

Hindu temples have also come under attack, bringing angry protests from community leaders.

“All this violence against Hindus began in the 1980s, but lately it has been growing worse. We do not feel safe,” Amarnath Motumal said.