

Outlawed Islamist group accused of inciting Pakistan riots

August 22, 2023

JARANWALA, Pakistan (BP)—An outlawed Islamist group has been charged with inciting destructive riots in Pakistan after two Christian brothers were accused of blasphemy there.

Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan clerics shouted inflammatory slogans from mosque loudspeakers after the brothers were accused of defacing a Quran, Reuters reported Aug. 21, citing police and community members as sources.

Rioters burned 20 churches, vandalized 80 homes, burned belongings and desecrated a Christian cemetery, many news outlets reported. No deaths were reported.

“Better to die if you don’t care about Islam,” police quoted one cleric as saying, global news agency Agence France-Presse reported Aug. 19.

“That cleric should have understood that when you gather people in such a charged environment ... in a country in which people were already very sensitive about (blasphemy) it is like adding fuel to fire,” the news agency quoted police.

“He’s not saying go and burn their houses. But when the mob gathers, it’s really impossible to control that.”

Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan clerics denied the accusations, police said, and joined peace efforts after the riot in attempts to dupe police.

Blasphemy accusations trigger riots

The Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan—with its rallying cry of “death to blasphemers”—focuses mainly on protecting Pakistan’s harsh blasphemy laws. The group has been active in electoral politics since the 2016 execution of Mumtaz Qadri, a police guard who received the death penalty for assassinating Punjab Gov. Salman Taseer in 2011. Taseer had sought to reform Pakistan’s blasphemy laws.

While approximately 130 Muslims were arrested after the riots, the two Christian brothers were also arrested for blasphemy.

The case began after Muslims in Jaranwala accused 24-year-old Umar Saleem, known as Rocky, of tearing pages from the Quran and writing defamations on the pages in red, *Morning Star News* reported. Rocky’s brother Raja, 21, was also charged.

Reportedly, the defaced pages were found in the street with Rocky’s and Raja’s names, addresses and national identities attached. The two men, members of a Full Gospel Assemblies church, surrendered to police. Charges against them are punishable by life imprisonment and death.

A court ordered the two men be held in police custody seven days for questioning, Reuters reported Aug. 21. Their release date would be this week, but there are no reports of the charges being dropped.

False charges of blasphemy are a common method of persecution of Christians in Pakistan, but Pakistani officials acknowledged the mob attacks were a “planned conspiracy,” *Morning Star* reported.

Punjab Caretaker Chief Minister Mohsin Naqvi told Christian leaders the government would restore the churches and homes damaged or destroyed in the incident.

“Whatever damages took place, as a government, Muslims and humans, we will restore them,” *Morning Star* quoted Naqvi.

Another leader quoted in *Morning Star News*, Pakistan Ulema Council Chairman Hafiz Tahir Ashrafi, apologized for the violence and said he was committed to protecting “our Christian brothers.”

“We are ashamed,” he said.