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Responses to Information Requests

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14 January 2013

PAK104258.E

Pakistan: Religious conversion, including treatment of converts and forced conversions (2009-2012)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Forced Conversions to Islam

Sources report that non-Muslim girls and women in Pakistan are kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam, and married to Muslim men (Shirkat Gah 2012, 6; *Plus News Pakistan* 16 Jan. 2012; GHRD and HRFP [2012], 9). Peace Foundation Pakistan, a Pakistani NGO, stated in its submission to the fourteenth session of the UN Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review in October-November 2012 that forced conversion and marriage is a "common" issue for non-Muslim women and girls (2012, para. 15). This assessment was corroborated by the Catholic Archbishop Emeritus of Lahore in an interview with *AsiaNews* (25 Aug. 2011), as well as by the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) (10 Oct. 2011). Some sources also indicate that minority girls who are kidnapped and forcibly converted are also raped (AHRC 10 Oct. 2011; US 20 Mar. 2012, 8; GHRD and HRFP [2012], 10).

In a 2012 interview with the UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), a Karachi-based lawyer and Hindu community leader said that the practice of kidnapping and forcibly converting Hindu girls had been increasing over the previous four or five years (UN 27 Feb. 2012). The Human Rights Council of Pakistan (HRCP) has also reportedly indicated that the number of forced conversions of Hindu girls and women is on the rise (US 20 Mar. 2012, 8; Shirkat Gah 2012, 6). Sources report that the number of Hindu girls and women abducted for forced conversion per month is approximately 20 (*The Express Tribune* 11 Mar. 2012; US 30 July 2012, 12) or 25 (*ibid.*; Shirkat Gah 2012, 6). Sources also indicate that 15 to 20 such incidents take place each month in Karachi, Sindh Province (US 20 Mar. 2012, 8; UN 27 Feb. 2012). The Jinnah Institute, a non-profit, nonpartisan, public-policy organization that promotes the "values of equitable democratic and social entitlements, pluralism, rule of law and transparent governance" (n.d.), reports that the forced conversion of Hindu women occurs "on a regular basis" in Sindh province (2011, 55).

Several NGOs estimate that at least 700 Christian girls are kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam every year (US 20 Mar. 2012, 7; GHRD and HRFP [2012], 10 note 12; Franciscans International 29 July 2011). However, a representative of the HRCP also notes that some families do not report the crime because they fear that it will ruin their reputation (*The Express Tribune* 11 Mar. 2012).

A Member of the provincial assembly in Karachi, cited in *Plus News Pakistan* and referring to reports he received from around the city, said that forcibly converted Christian girls, although already married, are sold into marriage to "feudal lords in Sindh and Punjab" (16 Jan. 2012). A joint report by Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD) and Human Rights Focus Pakistan (HRFP), human rights NGOs based in the Hague and Faisalabad, respectively, indicates that mosque sermons encourage Muslim men to convert Hindu and Christian women to Islam by marrying them (GHRD and HRFP [2012], 9), a statement that is corroborated by the Jinnah Institute (2011, 55). A representative of the HRCP has also reportedly stated that "extremists" preaching at madrassas [private schools run by Islamic clerics (US 30 July 2012, 5)] give instructions on how to convert non-Muslims (*The Express Tribune* 11 Mar. 2012). Further, the AHRC expresses its opinion that Pakistani law enforcement officials do not try to prosecute perpetrators "because the religious groups are doing great work in the name of Islam" (10 Oct. 2011).

Sources indicate that girls who are forcibly converted and married are prevented from having contact with their families (Shirkat Gah 2012, 7; *The Express Tribune* 11 Mar. 2012; GHRD and HRFP [2012], 10). GHRD and HRFP report that abducted girls and women are subject to "intimidation and isolation" and are "coerced" by police and their abductors to testify in court that they converted willingly to Islam (*ibid.*). In correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, the British Pakistani Christian Association (BPCA), a London-based NGO focusing on human rights abuses in Pakistan against Christians and other religious minorities (2012, para. 1), suggested that abductors ensure the girls' compliance by threatening to murder their family members or accuse them of blasphemy (14 Dec. 2012). Additionally, the AHRC reports on "numerous" court hearings intended to determine the legitimacy of the conversion, which are attended by students from local madrassas who "intimidate the judges by chanting demands that the conversion be confirmed" (13 Nov. 2012).

The AHRC also indicates that, according to a local NGO representative, in only one of the hundred cases on which the representative had worked was the girl returned to her family (13 Nov. 2012). Sources also report on cases in which victims' families who filed criminal

charges with the police were threatened by the perpetrators (CLAAS 25 Oct. 2012; Franciscans International 29 July 2011; *The Express Tribune* 11 Mar. 2012).

Sources report that a 12-year-old Christian girl from Punjab was kidnapped, forcibly converted, and repeatedly raped over a period of eight months in 2011 while in captivity, before managing to escape (AHRC 10 Oct. 2011; ANI 13 Oct. 2011). The police reportedly advised the girl's parents to return her to her abductors, since one of the men had a marriage certificate indicating that he had married the girl (*ibid.*; AHRC 10 Oct. 2011). The family subsequently went into hiding (*ibid.*; ANI 13 Oct. 2011).

According to the Government of Pakistan, national law "strictly forbids forced conversions," as does Islam (6 Aug. 2012, para. 78). The government reports that the Supreme Court has "actively pursued" cases of forced conversions and has allowed victims to express their wishes in "complete privacy and safety" (Pakistan 6 Aug. 2012, para. 78). Sources reported in July 2012 that the National Assembly's standing committee on national harmony had forwarded recommendations to the law ministry suggesting life sentences and financial penalties for perpetrators of forced conversion, among other measures (*The Express Tribune* 22 July 2012; *Dawn* 16 July 2012; *The Daily Times* 17 July 2012). Pakistani media sources reported in September 2012 that the government was working on legislation against forced conversions (*The Nation* 25 Sept. 2012; *Dawn* 30 Sept. 2012). Further information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the US Department of State, religious minority groups claim that the government's actions on the issue are "inadequate" (30 July 2012, 12). Similarly, the leader of the Pakistan Hindu Council reportedly stated that the government "'gives little heed'" to the kidnapping and forced conversion of Hindus (AFP 27 July 2012).

1.1 Refusing Conversion to Islam

According to various sources, Christians in Pakistan face pressure from societal actors to convert to Islam (BPCA [2012], para. 14-15; JI 2011, 51). In an interview with the Associated Press, the head of the National Commission for Justice and Peace, an affiliate of the Catholic Bishop's Conference, noted that "as a coercion to convert" to Islam, religious minorities are sometimes accused of violating Pakistan's blasphemy laws by insulting Islam (28 Mar. 2012). Sources have reported on cases in which members of religious minorities who refused to convert to Islam were accused of blasphemy (Compass Direct News 12 Mar. 2012; *The Express Tribune* 9 Oct. 2012). For additional information on the application of blasphemy laws in Pakistan, see Response to Information Request PAK104260 of 10 January 2013.

The GHRD and HRFP report states that, in November 2011, a 15-year-old Christian girl from Faisalabad was abducted by four Muslim youths, raped, and killed, after she and her family had received repeated threats for refusing to convert to Islam ([2012], 11). One of the perpetrators was arrested but found innocent, having reportedly bribed the police (GHRD and HRFP [2012], 11). Compass Direct News, an online Christian news source reporting on the situation of Christians worldwide (n.d.), reports that a group of Muslims tortured and killed a Christian man in Punjab in March 2010 because he refused to convert to Islam (22 July 2012). The same source states that three men were convicted of the murder in 2012 and sentenced to life in prison (Compass Direct News 22 July 2012). Corroborating information for these incidents could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Other Conversions to Islam

Media sources report that, in July 2012, a Hindu man converted to Islam on live television (AFP 27 July 2012; *Dawn* 27 July 2012). Agence France-Presse reports that the conversion took five minutes under the guidance of a cleric (27 July 2012). In a subsequent interview with the Karachi-based newspaper the *Express Tribune*, the converted man stated that his family and relatives were "outraged" and that he no longer eats or drinks in his family's home (*The Express Tribune* 6 Oct. 2012). The article notes, however, that the "furore" has since subsided and that the man's conversion had been accepted by some of his family members (*ibid.*).

Sources report that a Christian teenager who travelled to Karachi in 2008 with her younger sister to convert to Islam was raped by two lawyers, one of whom was responsible for conducting the "legal formalities regarding [the girls'] conversion" (*Plus News Pakistan* 20 Oct. 2011; *Dawn* 23 Nov. 2008). *Plus News Pakistan* indicates that the lawyers were acquitted in 2011 (20 Oct. 2011).

The *Express Tribune* reports that a Christian couple from south Punjab who had recently married and converted to Islam were shot and killed by the woman's brother in October 2012 (21 Oct. 2012). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Conversions from Islam to Minority Religions

According to the US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011*, individuals who converted to minority religions generally did so in secret "to avoid societal backlash" (30 July 2012, 19). In correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, the Evangelical Asian Church, a faith-based charitable organization based in Toronto (Donnelly et al. 2012, 5), stated that Muslim converts to Christianity are "not treated well" by society and that they are at risk of being killed by "extremists" (Evangelical Asian Church 14 Dec. 2012). Similarly, in correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, the BPCA wrote the following:

In all mainstreams of Islamic jurisprudence abandoning Islam is considered a capital crime, particularly for men. Thus in general, families think and society thinks very poorly of converts to Christianity, and many deem it their duty to kill them, especially as Pakistan is an honour shame society. ... Pakistani society in general is extremely hostile to converts, and attacks on those who have converted can re-occur years or even decades after they have changed religion.

Although there are no doubt some stories that we don't get to hear about converts being treated relatively well, converts do suffer greatly, including denial of basic human rights like medical treatment. (14 Dec. 2012)

Media sources report that in the village of Kot Marth [also Kot Meerath] in March 2012, a sixty-year-old woman was "tortured," having had her head shaven, and paraded through the streets because of her religious beliefs, and subsequently fled the village with her family in

fear for their lives (*The Times of India* 3 Mar. 2012; *The Express Tribune* 10 Mar. 2012). The *Express Tribune* states that the woman had converted from Christianity to Islam for six months before reconverting to Christianity and that the attacks were "retaliation" for the reconversion (10 Mar. 2012). The *Express Tribune* also reported in 2012 that a Christian couple who had converted to Islam and later reconverted to Christianity had to relocate several times over a period of six years after receiving threats and being pursued by Muslim neighbours because of their reconversion (26 July 2012). In an interview with the newspaper, one of the perpetrators, who had reportedly abducted and tortured the Christian man, stated the couple's reconversion was an insult to Islam and that it was his duty to bring them back to Islam (*The Express Tribune* 26 July 2012).

Sources report that two Christian couples in Punjab were forced to flee their homes after their Muslim neighbours discovered that the two women had been Muslims who had converted to Christianity before marriage (*ibid.* 25 Apr. 2012; Rediff.com 25 Apr. 2012). The Muslim community reportedly demanded custody of the two women, claiming that Muslims could not live with Christians (*ibid.*; *The Express Tribune* 25 Apr. 2012).

Sources indicate that it is difficult to convert from Islam to another religion (BPCA 14 Dec. 2012; Evangelical Asian Church 14 Dec. 2012; Compass Direct News 26 June 2012). The Evangelical Asian Church wrote that it is "very hard" to legally change one's religion and that the Qur'an and the Hadith call for the death of those who leave Islam (14 Dec. 2012). The BPCA stated that, although it is theoretically possible to change religions, in practice it is "not really" possible "in the eyes of the state" for a Muslim to convert to Christianity because the "state apparatus hinders" the process (14 Dec. 2012). The organization explained that the national ID card system allows citizens to change their religion to Islam but does not permit registered Muslims to change to another religion (BPCA 14 Dec. 2012). This information is corroborated in a news article by Compass Direct News, which explains that the law establishing Pakistan's National Database and Registration Authority, which records the religion of citizens when they apply for a national ID card, prohibits Muslims from changing their religion (26 June 2012).

For additional information on the situation of Christians in Pakistan, see Response to Information Request PAK104259.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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