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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONCERNS WITH RESPECT TO SHIAS IN PAKISTAN

Violence against Shias

The following information comes from direct communication with the South Asia Team of researchers at the International Secretariat of *Amnesty International*, and from their recent report "PAKISTAN: Insufficient protection of religious minorities", *Amnesty International*, May 2001

Sectarian violence between Shia (who make up some 15% of Pakistan's 156 million people) and Sunni groups -- a threat to peace, security and stability of the people and the country -- has cost hundreds of lives in recent years, mostly Shia. It is a legacy which the present government has inherited from successive earlier governments which either failed to decisively tackle the problem, either due to indecision or fear of backlash, or tried to use religious groups for their own political ends and so fed sectarian violence. After several weeks of relative calm after the military takeover in 1999, sectarian killings resumed and have since then remained at a consistently high level.

The pattern most often observed involves prominent members of one of the religious communities or organizations being shot dead by gunmen riding by on motorbikes; subsequently, especially around the time of the burial and other ceremonies for the deceased revenge killings take place, carried out by violent mobs which lead to further revenge killings. At this stage civilians of either community are frequently killed as attacks turn indiscriminate.

The state appears to have been unable or unwilling to prevent religiously motivated violence. During sectarian clashes, police frequently stand by or only appear on the scene when people have been injured or killed and property destroyed. Following the shooting of Maulana Yusuf Ludhianvi, a well-known Sunni scholar at the Binori Town seminary, along with his driver near his home in Karachi on 18 May 2000, the city was virtually under the control of Islamist groups and public life almost came to a standstill. Despite the ban on political meetings imposed in March 2000, police and the paramilitary Rangers, withdrew and allowed demonstrators a free hand, resulting in immense loss of property and dozens of people being injured. "The strike, the killing and the events thereafter point to one thing clearly: the law enforcement agencies have completely failed to become pro-active. The terrorists or criminals, call them what you may, can strike at will and get away with it."

The state appears also to have been unable or unwilling to ensure legal redress after violent sectarian incidents. The fact that police only rarely arrest those responsible for sectarian killings is partly due to police training deficiencies but also to the fact that witnesses are afraid to come forward and testify in the absence of adequate witness protection programs. Following the targeted killing in Karachi of four Shia men, a doctor and his three patients, in May 2000, police arrested scores of suspects but all were released within a day as no witnesses came forward to testify. Fears of retaliation are well-founded as key witnesses of sectarian crimes as well as

lawyers, prosecutors and judges have been murdered in revenge acts by the community of the accused. Consequently, cases of high profile sectarian killings remain pending for years as judges, lawyers and witnesses fear for their lives.

After prevaricating for some time, the government in late 2000 took some action to stop sectarian violence. In December 2000, the Punjab Inspector General of Police said that a special task force would be established to tackle sectarian violence and terrorism. A month later during a meeting with Islamic groups in Islamabad, Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider announced the setting up of Ulema Committees tasked to promote sectarian peace and intercede in case of tension. Observers have pointed out that such committees have failed in the past to promote peace because clerics, often responsible for sectarian violence, had been included in them. At the same time Haider announced a survey to register all mosques in the country to prevent further forcible occupation by other religious groups, a context in which violence had often flared up.

Recent direct communication with the South Asia Team of researchers at the International Secretariat of *Amnesty International* confirms that there are no changes to the situation in the above-quoted report, and that attacks on Shia continue to happen and there is no improvement in the structures created to stop them.