

DOOR STILL OPEN

Despite Blasphemy Law



Despite changes in Pakistan, SIMNOW reports Christian literature distribution continues.

In Pakistan, a country of 141 million people, 96.8 percent are Muslim. The 1.9 million Christians comprise less than 0.3 percent of the population.

In 1986, military ruler, Gen. Zia ul-Haq, amended Pakistan's penal code to say that anyone who desecrates the name of the prophet Muhammad orally, in writing, or through insinuation, is guilty of blasphemy. In Pakistan, meaning "land of the religiously pure," enforcement of this broad definition of blasphemy has serious consequences for Christians. Since conviction carries a mandatory death sentence, Christians who are charged with blasphemy faces disgrace, death, exile or a life in hiding.

On May 6, 1998, Roman Catholic Bishop John Joseph's suicide protesting the law sparked Christian demonstrations in Pakistan and an international outcry. Though the government has not executed any Christians at this writing, some died as a result of mob violence, including a judge who overturned the blasphemy conviction of two Christian defendants.

In a public address delivered this past April, Gen. Pervez Musharraf promised to revise the blasphemy law. Musharraf ascended to power in a coup October 1999. He said blasphemy cases will undergo a preliminary investigation to ensure their validity. Past cases have often arisen from village feuds, rather than religious offense. Marginalization of religious minorities at the

government level has made it difficult for Christian defendants to fight unjust accusations of blasphemy and to obtain legal protection. However, in response to demonstration threats from Islamic organizations, on May 16 the government affirmed there will be no changes to the blasphemy law.

Open Doors

Despite the concerns about the blasphemy law, Christians have continued activities in publication and literature distribution. SIMNOW reports that after months of inactivity due to the lack of funds and supervision, the Bookvan-a vehicle used to distribute Christian literature is on the road again.

"Since this evangelistic ministry began in the early '80s, we've seen many developments in Pakistan," says a former missionary to the country. "The blasphemy law has been introduced, we've seen much ethnic violence, and we've become a nuclear power. Yet the door for this type of work remains open."

Although the Bookvan team has to be more cautious than in earlier years, they continually meet people hungry for the word of God and books about Jesus Christ.

"We are out with the vehicle three days a week," reports the team leader. "Our primary focus is on 50 Muslim and Christian villages in a 100 kilometer radius in this area. In addition to

distributing books and materials, we would like to be able to show Christian films and videos in the villages, but we need the equipment.

"In a typical day, the bookvan ministry team visits two or three villages. First, we hold a worship service and prayer meeting with any Christians we find in the village. Then we go out to share the gospel with Muslims and visit Christian homes. Among the nominal Christians, biblical understanding is minimal and is often mixed up with teachings from other religions. Drug abuse and prostitution are sometimes a problem, especially in the inner city areas. We find we are constantly counseling in the area of moral conduct.

"Those who've never heard the gospel are usually very interested. Though they may not dare say, 'I want to know Jesus Christ,' they often buy books about Jesus and about Christianity. One young man has come to the Lord and would like to be baptized. He is doing a weekly Bible Study."

Prayer for more Christian literature distribution is vital. There is still great opportunity for making Christ known in Pakistan. Moreover, Christian books and materials help believers catch a vision for evangelism in their own neighborhoods. ❖

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