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# SUNDAY

# EXAMINER

*Catholic News of the Week*

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# Crazed violence in Pakistan and Iraq

HONG KONG (SE): In claiming responsibility for a bomb that exploded around 6.30pm in Gulshan-i-Iqbal Park in the city of Lahore in Pakistan on Easter Sunday, March 27, the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan Jamaatul Ahrar said it had intentionally targeted the Christian community at Easter.

It is believed that a suicide bomber was responsible for the carnage from the same group that claimed responsibility for attacks on two churches in Lahore in March last year, when 15 people died and 70 were injured.

However, Columban Father Liam O'Callaghan told the *Sunday Examiner* from Lahore that the District Coordination Officer of the city denied there was any connection between the two incidents.

He pointed out that the government in Islamabad had declared the day a national religious holiday marking both Easter Sunday and the Hindu festival, Holi—a fun spring festival celebrating the sharing of love.

Many people expressed indignation at this and some believe that the attack, specifically claimed to have been against Christians, is part of a wider protest against the policy of the current prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, to create a society that is inclusive of what are usually referred to as minority groups.

Seventy-five people were killed and 300 others wounded, some seriously. The majority of the dead are women and children. However, while Christians are said to have been the target of the attack, only 14 casualties were identified as Christian, with others being Hindu and Muslim.

Father O'Callaghan described it as another dark day for Pakistan as it shows that the security situation is out of control and people of all faiths and none are forced to live in an atmosphere of fear, with no real hope of change.

He said that the cries of the people somehow dissolved the appreciation that had earlier been expressed to the government for recognising the religious sentiments of two minority groups in the country.



*Father O'Callaghan says that the attack cannot just be looked at in isolation, as it is an affront to all of Pakistan.*

He lamented that it is hard to sustain the Easter message and keep hope alive in such a situation, adding that rather than being simply an attack on Christians, it is part of a sustained assault on the whole of Pakistan.

He pointed out that the bomb explosion in Lahore should not be looked at in isolation, as he believes that another event that took place on the same day in Islamabad is part of the wider context.

"About 10,000 people gathered to attend the *chelem* (40th day after the death) of Mumtaz Qadri, a former police commando who was hanged in February for assassinating the man he had been assigned to protect," he said.

Qadri had been assigned to protect the life of the former governor of Lahore, Salman Taseer. It had been deemed that his life was in danger, because he had supported the reform of Pakistan's infamous blasphemy laws.

However, on 4 January 2011, Qadri took matters into his own hands and shot Taseer with his police revolver, saying that he would not protect anyone who opposed these laws.

Father O'Callaghan related that around 2,000 people from the gathering in Islamabad took matters into their own hands and occupied the Red Zone of the city,

which houses government buildings, including the parliament, and foreign embassies.

They presented a charter of demands to the government, which includes the implementation of Shariah Law, as well as the unconditional release of Sunni Muslim clerics and leaders being held on various charges of murder and terrorism.

The crowd also demanded that Qadri be declared a martyr.

In addition, the group called for the execution of the Christian woman, Aasia Bibi, who has faced long years in prison on blasphemy

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charges, as well as a long string of court hearings. Taseer was accused of trying to protect her through his criticism of the blasphemy laws.

A statement released by the National Council for Justice and Peace, signed by the chairperson, Bishop Joseph Arshad, and the national director, Father Mani Yousaf, laments that so many Muslims were killed in the brutal attack alongside their Christian and Hindu brothers and sisters.

The statement also says that while addressing the extremist situation through military operations, the government must also look into the root causes of what it calls extreme intolerance.

It adds that the proliferation of such attacks is a direct challenge to the writ of the state.

The government of the Punjab announced three days of mourning and the chief of staff of the armed

forces, Raheel Sharif, said that these inhuman savages will not be allowed to overrun the lives and liberty of the people of Pakistan.

Two days later, on March 29, another suicide bomber caused mayhem at a soccer match in the Iraqi city of Iskandariya (Alexandria).

In a message of condolence from Pope Francis, the Vatican secretary of state, Pietro Cardinal Parolin, said, "The pope prays that in the response to this senseless act of violence the people will be strengthened in their resolve to reject the ways of hatred and conflict and to work together fearlessly for a future of mutual respect, solidarity and freedom."

*Agence France Presse* reported that a man in the crowd blew himself up as the post-match presentation was being made. Twenty-nine people died and 60 were injured.

The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack.

Pope Francis encouraged those affected by terrorism to remember the mother of God, as she stood by his cross.

"She did not crumble beneath her pain, but her faith made her stronger. In her broken mother's heart, faith has always been the flame of hope. We ask her to help us to fully accept the Easter proclamation of the resurrection and to embody it in the reality of our daily lives," he said.

## An attack on all Pakistan

LAHORE (SE): As a sign that the attack on people gathered in Gulshan-i-Iqbal Park in the city of Lahore is an attack on all of Pakistan, candlelight vigils for the dead and wounded have been attended by people from all faiths and all walks of life.

Muslims, Hindus, Christians and other groups have joined hands in condemning the attack in the strongest possible way.

Dominican Father James Chanman wrote in a letter published by *AsiaNews*, "Most Pakistani Muslims are peace-loving and condemn all sorts of harm, discrimination and attacks against Christians."

He adds, "Only a small number of misguided, radical groups attack us and Muslims as well. They attack mosques, churches, schools, public parks, the army, police stations, buses and trains. The aim of militants is to create panic and a sense of insecurity."

Archbishop Sabastian Shah, from Lahore, told Aid to the Church in Need, "I visited every bedside and every victim, of whatever faith. It was truly difficult, because I saw so many children, only four- or five-years-old, both Christians and Muslims, who had been wounded or killed by this terrible attack."

Archbishop Shah said that it is

customary to celebrate in the park after Christmas and Easter Masses. It is also a popular place for family picnics and relaxing.

"After the attacks last year on two Christian churches in the Youhanabad quarter, we were fearful that there might be another attack, and for this reason the government had provided all the necessary security measures to protect the churches—but no one had thought about the park," he said.

He added there may have been an intention to send a message to the prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, as his home is close to the park and his brother, Shahbaz Sharif, also lives nearby.