

## **Growing threat and violence against the non-Muslim community of Umerkot**

### **Demands of Protest Rally in Karachi**

**September 20, 2014**

In late July this year, two trader brothers belonging to the Hindu Community in District Umerkot were brutally murdered. The murders followed a string of attacks on non-Muslim communities in the form of murders, kidnappings, forced conversions and attacks on worship places in Umerkot as well as in other parts of the Sindh Province.

The gruesome murder sparked heavy protest across the region. However, the response of the state authorities was “business-as-usual”. The local police killed two men in an “encounter” near Naukot last week, declaring them as murderers. There was no investigation or any effort to nab anybody alive and produce before a judicial procedure to investigate the killings. Moreover, the Speaker National Assembly of Pakistan, following protests from local MNAs, announced to form a special committee to investigate excesses against the Hindu Community. However, the announcement was never followed.

Umerkot, where non-Muslim population is in majority in terms of numbers, is increasingly becoming a hub of targeted attacks against the Hindu community. Last year, there were close to twenty murders of local Hindu citizens reported in the media. This year, the count continues to rise. Frequent kidnappings and forced conversion of Hindu women are leading to mass exodus of the local population from the area. During last year’s general elections, the Hindu Community yet again faced threats from the powerful elements out to usurp our right to vote. There is neither any special attention to the threat against the local community nor have the provincial and the federal government taken any measures to address the concerns of the local population.

The brutal killing of Hindu community traders followed by police’s apathetic attitude in addition to issuing threats to the witnesses, is an indication of the tightening noose around the non-Muslim communities in the country. There is an urgent need to seriously look into the growing violence against the non-Muslim population.

This is the time for the state and the people of Pakistan to reiterate their commitment to equal citizenship for all. We believe that we are equal citizens of this state and have all the rights and protection guaranteed in the constitution. The state of Pakistan has a responsibility towards protecting its people and all instruments should be used to protect and uphold the rights of the non-Muslim community of the country.

In this regard, we urge that the murder of the Hindu community traders be taken seriously and reinvestigated through a judicial commission headed by an honest and credible member of the higher judiciary. Even if it is a case of robbery, there is no reason to close the file in a hush-hush manner as demonstrated by the authorities. While recording strong protest against the threatening posture against the non-Muslim community, we make the following demands:

1. A judicial inquiry of the murders be conducted. The inquiry tribunal must be headed by a High Court Judge and the investigation needs to be carried out transparently followed by a public

declaration of the findings. Local community leaders should be consulted in preparation of ToR of such a tribunal and a time frame should be given and followed.

2. It's an open secret that Non Muslims traders are frequently kidnapped in the area and released after paying heavy ransom. Victims and local traders are made to arrange ceremonies where elected representatives, who are alleged to have brokered the deal, are decorated with gold crowns. This is a serious issue reflecting the connivance of local political elites in crimes against common citizens. This matter should be investigated either by the same commission looking into the murder of the two brothers or by a separate commission.
3. The report of the police investigation committee headed by DIG Sanullah Abassi should be made public.
4. The police officials (SSP, SP, DSP & SHO) posted at the time of murder should be suspended to ensure an impartial and fair inquiry.
5. None of the senior postings in the local police belong to the Hindu community which is dominant in terms of population in the area. The community is never consulted for any appointments of the local officials nor are their concerns addressed regarding the growing lawlessness in the region. Thar, being a region dominated by the non-Muslim community, must have special provisions for the protection of the community. The appointments of the law and order officials must be made in consultation with the local population.
6. In view of the growing threat against the non-Muslim community in Thar, a local chapter of the Citizens Police Liaison Committee headed and run by the districts' community and businesspersons must be established in Umerkot. It should be authorized to act against the excesses against the Hindu Community.
7. The family of the victims that lost two bread-earners must be compensated.
8. The Thar region is increasingly becoming insecure for the non-Muslims. Apart from the ongoing humanitarian crisis, the local community is faced with frequent killings, kidnappings and forced conversions. We demand a High Court headed institution to investigate the rising attacks against the local Hindu community population and devise a proper strategy for the protection of the community.
9. In addition to lawlessness, the growing poverty, denial of social justice and lack of access to basic services such as food, drinking water and healthcare are resulting in humanitarian emergencies such as the recent successive droughts leading to deaths. There is an urgent need to investigate the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Thar, and address the social, economic and political root-causes of the issue in order to bridge the growing discontent in the region.
10. In the backdrop of the Supreme Court landmark ruling concerning the rights of the religious minorities in June this year, we demand the federal and the Sindh government to take every measure to implement the judgment. The ruling, carrying powerful provisions for the protection of the non-Muslim communities in the country, lays down a set of clear and binding directions for its implementation. The state has no reason to delay the setting up of related policy frameworks, institutions and mechanisms to pursue its implementation. The Sindh government must give a clear framework for the implementation of the judgment.

11. The Sindh government minority related departments have isolated the majority of the non-Muslim communities particularly scheduled castes as they function only for a group of powerful individuals. Funds allocated for the minorities either get lapsed or do not reach the deserving. The Sindh government should constitute a commission/ committee comprising reputable persons to review the current status of these departments/ committees and suggest recommendations which should be implemented.