

Pakistan. Gulzar (Caritas): “We are helping persecuted Christians and victims of floods and earthquakes”

(Islamabad) - Three and a half months ago, the minority Christian community of Jaranwala, 30 kilometres from Faisalabad in Punjab province, was the target of an angry mob that spread false accusations of blasphemy. Pakistan's blasphemy law, which has been in force for years, stipulates that anyone who insults Islam or the Prophet Muhammad must be punished with imprisonment or the death penalty. The homes of more than 500 families, out of an estimated 10,000 Christians, have been burnt or destroyed, their property looted, their crosses, Bibles and cemeteries desecrated. Some 30 to 40 churches have been destroyed. Caritas Pakistan, with its headquarters in Lahore and 250/300 staff spread over 8 offices in the country, intervened in their rescue, along with the Diocese of Faisalabad.



. executive director of Caritas Pakistan, told SIR. “I was inundated by a terrible stench of chemicals burnt in the flames, surrounded by devastated houses and churches. Fortunately, no one died.” Caritas, in collaboration with the Diocese of Faisalabad, has drawn up a plan to help the 500 households affected. **Support for rebuilding homes, schools and psychological counselling.** After an assessment of the specific needs, the Caritas workers distributed food and kitchen items, bedding, sheets, blankets, washing machines and offered help in home reconstruction works. Three 'Caritas Community Schools' have recently been opened, with approximately 90 students attending. The students also receive free educational materials, as well as psychological and social support. “This is a very poor and vulnerable community,” he says. “It was a traumatic event. Many children and old people still have nightmares, they don't sleep at night, they are afraid, they hide.” **The project continues:** on 16 December they will distribute Christmas presents to 300 families in Faisalabad, with a Christmas lunch to which many children are invited, “to make them feel the Church's closeness.”



["It took some time, but the provincial and federal governments came to realise that something needed to be done to bring the people together," says Gulzar. "They reflected on ways to prevent further violence. The local government, the Catholic Church and the Muslim authorities are working together to restore harmony."](#) **Misuse of the blasphemy law.** [Gulzar confirmed that minorities are discriminated against in Pakistan, a country of 224 million inhabitants, including more than 2.5 million Christians. Such incidents are often reported in rural areas where residents are poor and illiterate. "The blasphemy law is used as an excuse," he explains. "Investigations often show that the cases are fabricated, charges are brought for personal cases."](#) However, major incidents of discrimination

also occur in urban centres, although they are less noticeable: “Many Christians feel that they are not treated with due consideration.

People's attitudes and behaviour need to change.

“But there are also cases where Christian families have been saved by Muslim families, who have taken them into their homes,” Gulzar points out. There are many good people in Pakistan, but successfully reversing discriminatory behaviour is a huge challenge. Our efforts to prevent clashes and conflict must continue.” **“Review the Law to prevent its misinterpretation.”** According to the director of Caritas Pakistan, “it is essential to amend the blasphemy law because it is often misinterpreted. But the most important thing is to change the behaviour, the mentality of the people, to make them realise that even though the state religion is Islam, the country was founded on the basis of religious coexistence.” Unsurprisingly, the white stripe of Pakistan's flag represents religious minorities and minority religions, while the green represents Islam and the Muslim majority.

“It is necessary to start with schoolchildren, providing information and teaching respect for diversity at all levels of education.



[. Its main commitment is to respond to emergencies such as floods and earthquakes. The last catastrophic flood was in August 2022. Thanks to the support of Caritas Italy and the Italian](#)

[Episcopal Conference, more than 10,000 families have been reached with emergency aid, including food, non-food items, tents, agricultural and farming supplies, food security, water and sanitation, education and support for children. **Building communities resilient to earthquakes and floods.** Caritas Pakistan promotes prevention efforts to build resilient communities in the most vulnerable areas near rivers, given the frequency of flooding during the monsoon season. A recent survey showed that 35 villages they worked in were less affected by the 2022 floods than others: "People listened to the government's messages and managed to save people, animals and personal belongings, taking their documents with them as they fled." **1,300,000 trees planted.** Climate change mitigation through tree planting is also a major challenge: 1.3 million trees have been planted in various vulnerable areas of Pakistan so far, and the project is still ongoing. The funding for the many and varied projects is mainly provided by Caritas Italy, Caritas Austria and Caritas Germany.](#)

[Patrizia Caiffa](#)