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PAKISTAN | Blasphemy Accusation Triggers Burning of Homes in Lahore

As many as 100 properties are said to have been burnt on March 9 as a mob of thousands targeted the Christian-majority area of Joseph Colony, Badami Bagh, Lahore.

The violence was reportedly triggered by a blasphemy accusation made against a young Christian, Savan Masih, on March 8. The unrest spiraled as word spread of the allegation and protestors demanded his arrest. Police took him into custody, but it is unclear whether or not he has been formally charged. At least one local religious leader has openly called for Savan to be killed.

Nearly all the residents of Joseph Colony, home to around 150 Christian families, fled in anticipation of the attacks, some on the advice of local police.

Pakistan's Minister for National Harmony, Dr. Paul Bhatti, has condemned the incident. Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah has stated publicly that those responsible for the violence will be held accountable, and the Christians will be compensated for loss of property.

Michelle Chaudhry, activist and Executive Director of the Cecil & Iris Chaudhry Foundation, also condemned the attacks, saying, "The residents of Joseph Colony are among some of the poorest in Lahore and now many have lost everything. It is crucial that the government follows through on its promises to provide compensation. It is however encouraging that we have been receiving messages and offers of support from Muslim friends all day. It reminds us that this country does still have a soul."

In August 2012, a similar incident was narrowly averted in Islamabad, in the wake of the false blasphemy charge against a Christian teenager, Rimsha Masih. The Christian community fled its homes in fear of violence in that instance as well.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "We are shocked and saddened to hear of another terrible attack of this kind. While blasphemy accusations do affect Pakistanis of all faiths, cases against minorities routinely lead to the violent targeting of the wider community of the accused. It is absolutely unacceptable that local police did not take more serious measures to prevent this entirely foreseeable violence. Just as the handling of Rimsha Masih's case represented a step forwards, this situation underlines the huge amount of work that remains to be done. The lessons of past episodes of violence have still not been

learnt. We strongly condemn these attacks and call upon the Pakistani government to take immediate steps to increase security in the area, to support those who have fled, to arrest those inciting and carrying out the violence, and to ensure that the blasphemy accusation is properly and fairly investigated so that mob justice does not prevail.”