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PAKISTAN | Dozens Killed in Suicide Attack Targeting Christians

A suicide bomb attack targeting the Christian community in Pakistan on Easter Sunday killed over 72 people and injured around 300. Jamatuul Ahrar, a faction of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, claimed responsibility for the devastating attack that took place in the Gulshan-e-Iqbal Park, Lahore on March 27 where families from Lahore's Christian community were celebrating the Easter holiday. One bomb was detonated near the entrance to the park close to the children's swing area, killing many women and children.

CSW's sources reported that the hospitals in Lahore have been full beyond their capacity treating victims suffering horrific injuries and urgent appeals for blood donations were made. In the chaos following the attack, many children became separated from their parents. CSW received reports that at least one young boy tragically lost both parents and his brothers and sisters.

CSW's partner, Michelle Chaudhry from The Cecil and Iris Chaudhry Foundation said, "We are not only hurt and grieving but also very angry over the loss of so many innocent lives. Just one year on from the Youhanabad attacks, the Christian community has been hit at the heart of our nation. We are again compelled to pick up body parts of our loved ones and prepare for mass burials. Mere condemnation is not enough. The federal and provincial governments have to assert their authority to work jointly on a strategy to protect religious minorities and to stop the brutal violence committed by terrorists. We demand that the government brings the perpetrators to justice and ends the culture of impunity."

Violent attacks against all religious minorities have increased in recent years. The Christian community has been the deliberate target of several major attacks including the church bombings in Peshawar in September 2013 and the burning down of the Christian Joseph Colony in Lahore in March 2013. The Christian community in Lahore's Youhanabad district is still recovering from the double church bombings which occurred in March 2015, leaving 17 people dead and 70 people injured.

Three days of mourning were declared in the state of Punjab. While Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif announced several compensation packages for victims and the affected families, many are calling on the government to take stringent measures to address the underlying causes of attacks on religious minorities and the deteriorating security situation in the country.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply saddened by the loss of lives including many women and children and our heartfelt prayers go out to the families who have been affected. We condemn this appalling attack against the Christian community which took place only one year after attacks on St John's Church and Christ Church in Youhanabad. The Government of Pakistan can no longer ignore the threats to an already beleaguered Christian community. The government must deliver justice to the victims; hold to account the perpetrators of this deplorable crime and take decisive and immediate action to curb the extremism which has a stronghold on the country."