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PAKISTON | Court Acquits 115 Accused in Attack

On Jan. 29, Pakistan's Anti-terrorism Court acquitted 115 people accused of violence and the burning of over 100 homes in the Christian neighborhood of Joseph Colony, Lahore in 2013.

The accused were acquitted by the anti-terrorism court due to lack of evidence after state prosecution witnesses said they did not recognize any of them. Witnesses claimed the suspects were not the ones responsible for the blaze, despite over 80 witnesses for the prosecution, documented evidence and footage of the attack, which occurred in broad daylight.

The attack on Joseph Colony was triggered by a blasphemy accusation against a Christian man in March 2013. On March 9, 2013, approximately 3,000 people set fire to houses in the Christian neighborhood after a young Christian man, Sawan Masih, was accused of blasphemy on March 8, 2013, for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammed during a conversation with a Muslim friend. Despite maintaining his innocence and claiming that the incident was part of a plot to seize land, Sawan Masih was sentenced to death March 27, 2014.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws are widely misused and false accusations are often used to settle personal scores. Both Muslims and non-Muslims are affected, though, as the case of Joseph's colony demonstrates, non-Muslims are often disproportionately affected as entire communities suffer the consequences of a blasphemy allegation being lodged against one member of that community. The laws, which are vague and subject to abuse due to the ease of registering allegations, also highlight underlying weaknesses in Pakistan's judicial system. Often the accused, their family, lawyers and judges face threats, violence and intimidation from the community and Islamist groups.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomed news in late 2016 that Pakistan's Senate Committee on Human Rights will begin a debate on the blasphemy laws. CSW's Advocacy Director Joel Edwards said, "It is disappointing that not one prosecution was made in relation to

the violent attack on Joseph Colony in 2013, which destroyed over 100 homes and displaced around 150 families - the effects of which are still felt today. Blasphemy accusations affect Pakistanis of all faiths and we welcome the news that the Senate Committee will debate the blasphemy laws. This is a first step towards preventing abuse of the laws, and hopefully, in time, their full repeal.”