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PAKISTAN | Christian Sanitation Worker Dies

A Christian sanitation worker, who fell ill after cleaning a manhole, died at Civil Hospital in Sindh on June 1 after he was refused treatment by the duty doctors. Sanitation jobs are considered “unclean” and are often reserved for religious minorities.

Irfan Masih, from Umerkot City in Sindh province, fell unconscious June 1 after inhaling toxic fumes from a manhole he was cleaning without using protective equipment. When Masih arrived at Civil Hospital in critical condition, he was covered in sludge. Doctors told family members they could not treat him because they were fasting, and he was “napaak” or unclean. Doctors asked Masih’s family to clean his body before administering any treatment.

Masih was left in the hospital gasping for breath while his brother and family cleaned him. Doctors then sent for an oxygen cylinder which was found to be empty. Masih died before another one could be delivered.

The Christian community in Pakistan faces widespread institutional discrimination in religious, societal, economic and political spheres. A large number of Christians who live below the poverty line are employed in cleaning occupations. Sanitation jobs in Pakistan are historically considered “unclean” and government advertisements specify that only religious minorities including Christians and Hindus need apply. Such advertisements have been criticized for maintaining discriminatory practices toward religious minorities while the municipal corporations are accused of allowing sanitation employees to work in highly dangerous conditions with little or no protective gear.

Since Masih’s death, three hospital employees have been arrested, Dr. Jaam Kunbhar, Civil Hospital Medical Superintendent; Dr. Allah Dad Rathore, a duty doctor and a medical officer known as Yousuf. The staff alleges that Masih was already dead when he was brought to the hospital. Three employees of the Umerkot Municipal Committee were arrested.

Michelle Chaudhry, President of the Cecil and Iris Chaudhry Foundation said, “We condemn this incident in the strongest manner. A society becomes exceedingly dangerous when it disregards all norms of humanity. An innocent precious life was lost because someone refused to perform his duty; a duty he is under oath and obligated to perform.”

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We are saddened by the death of Irfan Masih and our thoughts are with his family at this time. While we welcome the arrests of those implicated in the neglect that led to his death, we note that a number of sanitation staff have died after being exposed to harsh conditions without proper safety gear, in jobs for which they are earmarked because of their status as a religious minority in Pakistan. The government of Pakistan must put an end to discriminatory employment practices whilst also ensuring that those who do this work are supplied with essential protective equipment.”