

Pakistani court postpones trial in 2009 attacks on Christians

by [Anto Akkara](#)

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Bangalore, India, June 9 (ENInews)--Nearly two years after ten Christians were killed and nearly 100 houses burned in the Punjabi town of Gojra, a special court has suspended the trial of suspects in the carnage after a key witness fled Pakistan.

The Anti-Terrorism Court in Faisalabad also granted bail on 7 June to the last three of the 66 suspects (others had been already released on bail) who were arrested in connection with the incident in August 2009.

Accepting the chief public prosecutor's plea that "an eyewitness is at an unknown place in a foreign country and his attendance in the court is very important," the special court suspended the trial for a year to allow the key witness to return.

The attack was prompted by rumors of blasphemy against Islam. Hundreds of Muslims had been brought in buses and trucks to attack the Christians in Gojra, according to a report by the Catholic Church. The main complainant in the arson attack, Phanas Masih, fled Pakistan last year with his family.

Church sources asking for anonymity told ENInews 9 June from Lahore that key Christian witnesses have been under constant pressure to have the case withdrawn.

Roman Catholic priest Yaqoob Yousaf, who is presently vicar of Sacred Heart parish in Gojra, told ENInews that Masih as well as couple of other key witnesses left before a meeting last February at which community leaders reached a compromise to ask for a withdrawal of the case.

However, the trial court judge refused to accept the plea to quash the criminal proceedings, as demanded by the lawyers for the accused.

"This shows our plight. When our people (have to) run away under pressure, what can we do?" Father Emmanuel Yousaf Mani, National Director of the Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic church, told ENInews. Though the government has rebuilt houses for most of the dozens of Christian families rendered homeless by the violence in Gojra, Father Mani pointed out that "getting justice here is not easy. We are braving even bomb threats."

There are about three million Christians in Pakistan, where 95 percent of the population of 180 million is Muslim.