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A brutal assault on Pakistan's Ahmadi community on 28 May has left them feeling more vulnerable than ever before. Armed assailants laid siege to two mosques in Lahore, capital of Punjab Province, where Ahmadis were praying and killed at least 80 people.

The attack has been described by community leaders, who put the death toll at 93 with 100 injured, as the worst ever faced in the group's 121-year history. Dozens of victims still lie injured in Lahore hospitals, some in a critical state.

"Some are very badly injured, but we will not give in and we have not lost strength," Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a spokesperson for the Ahmadi community in Lahore, told IRIN.

"It was terrifying. We were hearing the sermon and preparing for prayers when the militants entered, and then mayhem broke out as shots were fired and people fell to the ground before my eyes," said Suleiman Ahmad, 19, present at the Garhi Shahu mosque when the attack began at around 1pm local time on 28 May. The siege lasted over three hours. Almost simultaneously, another Ahmadi mosque was attacked several kilometres away in Model Town.

Sajjad Bhutta, Lahore's District Coordination Officer, told IRIN the coordinated assault involved at least seven assailants who were armed with "guns, grenades and also suicide jackets". He said three suicide bombers had "blown themselves up at Garhi Shahu after fighting with police for hours".

Decades of discrimination

Pakistan's Ahmadi sect, estimated by international organizations to number between three to four million, has faced discrimination for decades.

While Ahmadis consider themselves Muslim, in 1974 Pakistan declared them "non-Muslims" following a campaign by orthodox Islamic groups who say some of the Ahmadi beliefs run contrary to Islam.

A decade later, tougher new laws were introduced, which, according to the US government's bipartisan religious freedoms commission, prevent Ahmadis from "posing" as Muslims.

The 2010 report by the commission states: "Ahmadis may not call their places of worship "mosques", worship in non-Ahmadi mosques or public prayer rooms which are otherwise open to all Muslims, perform the Muslim call to prayer, use the traditional Islamic greeting in public,

publicly quote from the Quran, or display the basic affirmation of the Muslim faith.” The report notes that of Pakistan’s religious minorities, Ahmadis face the “most severe legal restrictions”.

“There is a history behind this latest attack. The hatred spread by sections of the media has contributed to it,” said Ahmad. “We seek from the government no special treatment, simply the same protections as other citizens of Pakistan for we are citizens too.”

Ordinary Ahmadis say they face regular discrimination.

“My 10-year-old son, who attends a private school, has been repeatedly taunted and called an ‘infidel’ by other pupils after they found he was Ahmadi,” said Shahid Mirza, a resident of the Garhi Shahu area who arrived for Friday prayers just after the assault happened. “I saw the blood-covered bodies that were brought out. I can never forget those scenes.”

In a statement, the chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), Asma Jahangir, appealed to the sections of civil society “that have been sympathetic to the militants, for some inexplicable reasons, to raise their voice on this inhuman act and express their solidarity with the country’s vulnerable communities.”

HRCP said the Ahmadi community in Model Town had been facing threats for more than a year and described the security provided by the Punjab government as “not enough”. The Chief Minister of Punjab Province has condemned the attack as has the Prime Minister.