

# Bishop was protesting Islamic blasphemy law

By Muneer Ahmed  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

**KHUSHPUR, Pakistan** - Thousands of mourners yesterday demanded repeal of a law that bans blasphemy against Islam, a day after a Roman Catholic bishop killed himself to protest a death sentence against a Christian who had been convicted under the law.

Bishop John Joseph shot himself in the head Wednesday in the courthouse where Ayub Masih was tried and sentenced to death on April 27.

Masih, 26, remains in jail pending appeal. He was accused of speaking favorably of Salman Rushdie, who has lived in seclusion since Iranian religious leaders sentenced him to death for his allegedly blasphemous novel, "The Satanic Verses."

Joseph's body was taken to his home village near Faisalabad in preparation for his burial today. Thousands in the predominantly Christian village of Khushpur converged on the bishop's home.

At Vatican City, officials said the Faisalabad diocese was preparing a statement confirming that Joseph killed himself. The statement was to prevent accusations that he had been murdered.

Asian bishops, gathered at the Holy See for a monthlong synod, observed a moment of silence for Joseph during a session yesterday.

Joseph, 66, chairman of a human rights commission established by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Pakistan, threatened last month to protest Masih's death sentence in an "astounding" way.

"It is extremely sad that his decision has taken away the best of the best from the human rights movement in Pakistan, but his message comes through very clearly," said Peter Jacob, a spokesman for the Roman Catholic Church of Pakistan.

The 66-year-old bishop traveled Wednesday afternoon to Sahiwal, 435 miles south of Islamabad, to speak at a prayer meeting for Masih. Later, he went into a dark corridor of the courthouse alone and shot himself, Jacob said.

Several Christians have been sentenced to death, but the convictions were overturned by higher courts. There are about 2 million Christians in Pakistan, but most of the country's 140 million people are Muslim.



BISHOP JOHN JOSEPH Mourned in Pakistan

THE BOSTON GLOBE • SATURDAY, MAY 9, 1999



Relatives of the late Roman Catholic Bishop John Joseph gathered with other women beside his coffin yesterday in Faisalabad, Pakistan. Joseph killed himself in protest of religious discrimination.

## Suicide of Pakistan bishop spurs protest over religious repression

ASSOCIATED PRESS

**FAISALABAD, Pakistan** - Thousands of mourners halted a memorial service yesterday and seized the coffin of a Roman Catholic bishop who had killed himself to protest religious discrimination in Pakistan.

With the body in an ambulance, a huge procession of cars, buses, and taxis then drove 25 miles from Bishop John Joseph's village of Khushpur to the Cathedral of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Faisalabad.

"End persecution of Christians!" they shouted. "Repeal the blasphemous laws, stop the repression of religious minorities!"

Police, who said the mourners pelted them with stones, fired tear gas and bullets that wounded three people, including a young girl.

Yesterday was the second day of protests demanding repeal of a law

that bans blasphemy against Islam. Joseph killed himself Wednesday to protest a death sentence given to a Christian convicted of slandering Islam for praising Salman Rushdie's book "The Satanic Verses."

The 66-year-old Joseph, a noted human-rights campaigner, shot himself in the head in the courthouse where Ayub Masih was tried and sentenced to death April 27.

Human rights activists say more than 200 Christians jailed throughout the country have been sentenced to death for blasphemy. None has been executed, but Joseph claimed that Masih, like many others, was the victim of a concocted charge.

The law requires a mandatory death penalty for anyone who defiles the name of the Islamic Prophet Mohammed.

The leaders of Pakistan's two million Christians say they are a

community "living in fear." Rarely able to escape poverty, Christians comprise only 1 percent of this predominantly Muslim country and say they face daily discrimination.

Non-Muslims are denied a vote in general elections, but some seats in Parliament are reserved for them.

The city's superintendent of police, Mian Asif, said his officers were told to fire over protesters' heads, but two who had been hit by stones "fired directly at demonstrators against their orders."

Raja Zafarul Haq, Pakistan's minister for religious and minority affairs, expressed grief over Joseph's suicide but said Thursday that the blasphemy law was not directed against any particular religion.

The US State Department repeated its call for Pakistan to repeal the blasphemy law.

## The Boston Globe

### Pakistani Christians ask release of prisoner

HEALTH CARE

**FAISALABAD, Pakistan** - Hundreds mourning a bishop who killed himself in protest at Pakistan's blasphemy laws packed Faisalabad cathedral yesterday and demanded the release of another man arrested under the same legislation.

An uneasy calm prevailed ahead of today's funeral of Roman Catholic Bishop John Joseph, who shot himself on Wednesday to protest against a death sentence in April on Ayub Masih, who was convicted of defaming the Prophet Mohammed.

Distraught members of Pakistan's tiny Christian minority filed past Joseph's coffin to pay their last respects and called for the release of a man accused of breaking a board hearing a Quranic verse during unrest over Joseph's death.

Ranjah Masih was arrested yesterday after a Muslim complained to police that he had damaged the board. Deputy Police Commissioner Abid Saeed said. He said Masih had been arrested pending an investigation. The two Masihis are not related.

Christians complain that under the act Muslims can accuse a member of the minority faith of blasphemy to extort money or get land.

Joseph's acting replacement as bishop of Faisalabad, Bishop Fomnie Mendes, said the bishop's suicide would unleash a wave of protest against the legislation.

"The blood of John Joseph will cause a revolution," he said. "He laid down his life for a cause and was fighting against discrimination."

Disturbances were reported in Ayub Masih's southern home village of Anrat Nagar, where several hundred demonstrators burned tires and set up roadblocks demanding his release.

They chanted slogans denouncing the government and calling for the repeal of the legislation. "The government is forcing us to fight. How many more people will see nooses hanging around their necks," one protester said.

THE BOSTON GLOBE • MAY 10, 1999

No one has ever been executed under the act, which was enforced in the 1977-88 martial law rule of President Zia ul-Haq.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said he hoped Joseph's suicide would not harm relations between the 2 percent Christian minority and the country's 120 million Muslims.

Sharif said in a message to Joseph's family that he deeply regretted Joseph's action and pledged that minority rights were guaranteed under the constitution.

"In this case it is regretted that the deceased bishop, instead of following the course of law, decided to act otherwise," the message said. "We hope it will not harm the ideal friendly relations between Christians and Muslims. The only need is for the observance of patience and tolerance," he said.

THE GRAIN OF WHEAT CAN YIELD NO HARVEST UNTIL ITS DEAD!