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## PAKISTAN

## 15 killed in Taliban Attack on Lahore Churches

**At least 15 people were killed and more than 70 injured when two Taliban suicide bombers attacked churches in Lahore on Sunday, sparking mob violence in which two other suspected militants died.**

The bombings occurred during prayers at two churches located around half a kilometer apart in the city's Youhanabad neighborhood that is home to more than 100,000 Christians, officials said.

Broken window panes, blood and shoes were scattered across the blast sites. Police spokeswoman Nabila Ghazanfar said two policemen guarding the churches were among those killed in the attacks, while two people were beaten to death by protesters who took to the streets after the blasts.

"Policemen on duty at both the entrances tried to stop them but the bombers blew themselves up," she told AFP.



The angry mob protesting after the blast beat to death two people whom they suspected of being associates of the attackers. An AFP photographer saw the bodies of the two suspected militants on fire after the beatings. It was not clear whether they were still alive at the time.

Up to 4,000 Christians later spread across the city's streets; many were armed with clubs as they smashed vehicles and attacked a Metro bus station in a rare show of anger by the beleaguered minority.

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Jamaat-ul-Ahrar faction claimed responsibility for the attack.

### **Rising anger**

The thousands of Christian protesters who clashed with police on Sunday attacked their cars with stones and sticks, as women wept and beat their heads and chests.

The protesters, some wearing crosses round their necks, later turned on the city's bus rapid transit system -- a signature

project of the ruling PML-N party of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Christians make up around two percent of Pakistan's mainly Muslim population of 180 million. They have been targeted in attacks and riots in recent years, often over allegations of blasphemy.

Attacks were the worst on the community since a devastating 2013 double suicide-bombing in Peshawar that killed 82 people. That attack came months after more than 3,000 protesters torched some 100 houses as they rampaged through Joseph Colony, another Christian neighborhood of Lahore, following blasphemy allegations against a Christian man.



Sharif in a statement condemned the church bombings and "directed provincial governments to ensure the

security of (the) public and their properties”.

Zaeem Qadri, a spokesman for the provincial government, said efforts were being made to talk to the protesters to stop the rioting but “emotions are very high because their churches have been attacked”.

Christians also took to the streets in other cities, including Karachi, where around 200

protesters blocked a main road and burnt tyres. There were also demonstrations in Peshawar in the northwest, in the central city of Multan and in Quetta in the southwest.

Sunday's attack was the first by the Taliban since three of their major factions said on Thursday they had reunited.

The military has stepped up its fight against militants since

Taliban gunmen massacred more than 150 people, most of them children, at a school in Peshawar in December. A moratorium on executions in terror cases was lifted and the constitution amended to set up military courts for the speedy trial of terrorism cases. Later, the death penalty was reinstated for all capital cases.

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*Source: Dawn News*

