

Tensions increase after Pakistani Christian brothers shot dead in court

FAISALABAD, Pakistan - Two Christians have been killed, a church ransacked and shops burned as Muslim-Christian tensions erupted into five hours of violence in Faisalabad July 19.

Police restored order and dispersed the crowds by using shellfire. One day later, the situation remained tense, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

The murdered Christians were brothers who had been charged with publishing and distributing a blasphemous, anti-Islamic pamphlet. They were shot dead as they arrived at court to face the charges.

Five priests rushed to court after hearing the news and saw the bodies. Some were critical of the light security arrangements for the accused men.

"We had been demanding more security for them, but we never expected this," said Dominican Father Pascal Paulus. "Only three police guards was insufficient."

The deaths sparked a series of street clashes between Christians and Muslims, who raided Holy Rosary Catholic Church, pelting it with stones and causing extensive damage. Local mosques are said to have made provocative announcements over their loudspeakers, encouraging the violence, UCA News reported.

Afterward, church offices, including the local Caritas headquarters, remained closed, and some Christians fled their homes. Police said they arrested 60 Muslims.

A memorial service was held for the brothers at the city's Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul July 20. The congregation had to be escorted in and out by police.

"We urge Christians to remain peaceful, but we also demand that the real culprits be brought to justice," said Bishop Joseph Coutts of Faisalabad, who celebrated the

Mass. "Minorities have suffered a lot."

At Masses July 18, Father Paulus told parishioners not to discuss Islamic doctrine.

"Our survival depends on this," he said. "Respect Islam and try to be tolerant and peaceful."

On July 10, his church was stoned by a crowd of 100 Muslims carrying sticks and glass bottles, UCA News reported. Local Christians guarded the church for several nights after the incident.