



# TALIBAN SETS SIGHTS ON PAKISTAN'S SWAT VALLEY

*Christians expected to flee their homes if government continues to concede control*

Pakistan's Swat Valley, known for a long time as the "Switzerland of the Orient," has become the new target of Taliban forces. Formerly one of the richest and best educated areas of the country, the region is now a place of terror for residents who have been forced to submit to the Taliban's version of Sharia law.

Christians in Pakistan are in urgent need of your prayers as Pakistani authorities struggle through negotiations with the Taliban leadership that has determined to take over the country's beautiful Swat Valley and institute a severe system of Sharia law. ICC sources expect many Christians in the coming weeks and months to flee their homes if the government concedes to an agreement they signed in mid-February to accept Sharia law.

The Taliban are back in power. This time, however, they're not in Afghanistan, but in a well-protected valley in Pakistan that was for a long time known as the "Switzerland of the Orient" because of its natural beauty. The Swat Valley, as it is known in Pakistan, was formerly one of the richest and best educated areas in the country, due to its tourist industry. That all changed when the Taliban set their sights on gaining control.

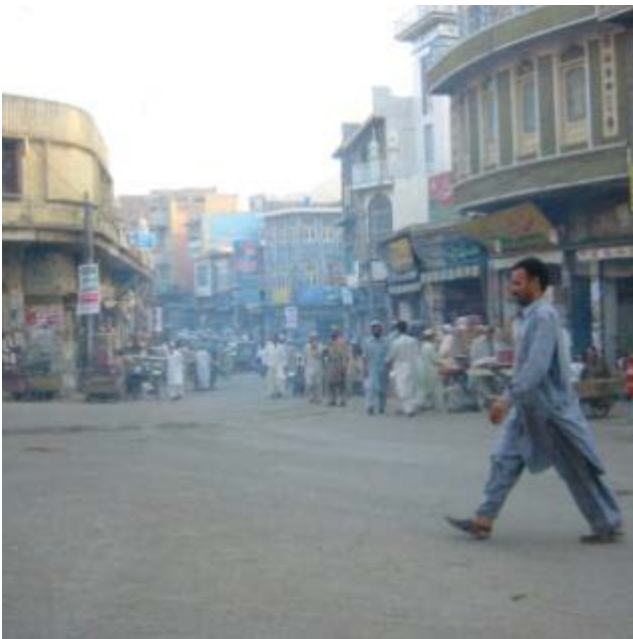
This is especially bad news for the estimated 500 Christians still living in Swat Valley after two years of warfare. According to Compass Direct, there is only one functioning Church of Pakistan congregation, while the only Catholic Church in the area was closed in 2007 when the Taliban began their campaign to take over Swat Valley.

At the time this article was written, we had not yet received any reports of persecution from Swat Valley due to the Taliban's tight control on information regarding their activity in the area. In the next few weeks and months, however, ICC sources have indicated that they are prepared to help as many Christians move out of the area as possible. Now may be the only time for them to escape before they are executed like the "heretics" that the Taliban left headless in the main city of Swat Valley early this year.

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Up until January 9, the Taliban had been conducting gruesome executions for weeks and leaving the dead bodies, with amputated limbs and heads, hung up on trees or telephone poles. Every morning the shopkeepers who worked in Grain Square in Mingora would find four or five of these victims newly displayed with notes pinned on them providing their names and their crimes against Islam. Residents of Mingora now call the square Khooni Chowk (Bloody Square).

It may have been these gruesome displays that caused the Pakistani government to concede the struggle for Swat Valley to the Taliban, signing an agreement with them in mid-February that accepts a system of Sharia law. While the government claims to be furthering its goal of defeating the militants, it is hard to understand how a truce will help.



A market square like this one in Mingora, Pakistan, became known by local residents as *Khooni Chowk*, or Bloody Square, because of the gruesome executions that the Taliban carried out in the city. Shopkeepers would wake nearly every morning to find notes pinned on the bodies of victims describing the crimes they had committed against Islam.

In the past two years of fighting, Taliban insurgents have destroyed 200 schools, prohibited girls from attending school past fourth grade, kept women from going out in public or working, and enforced a severe version of Islamic law. Those who have fallen afoul of the law have been punished through public beatings and hangings.

The people of Swat Valley have been clamoring for an end to the warfare. Disappointed with the corruption in Pakistani civil courts, Swat leaders have indicated that they would prefer the stability of Sharia. The Taliban version of Sharia law is one of the most violent forms of repression in the world. Not only does it call for the complete subjugation of women, it also requires that "infidels" and "heretics" be executed.

However, the story is not over, and the deal is far from done. On April 2, a major Pakistani newspaper reported that negotiations between Taliban leadership and the Pakistani

government over Swat Valley were still ongoing and had come to an impasse. The president of Pakistan has not yet agreed to the arrangement either at the time this article was written.

Please pray that the Pakistani authorities will not give up the fight for Swat Valley, and that God will protect the Christians who have remained behind under Taliban terror. Ω