

Query response a-6445 of 5 December 2008

**Pakistan: Structure and objective of the Mehdi Foundation and the perception of this movement/sect in Pakistan**

This response was commissioned by the UNHCR Status Determination and Protection Information Section. Views expressed in the response are not necessarily those of UNHCR.

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to ACCORD within time constraints and in accordance with ACCORD's methodological standards and the *Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI)*.

This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status, asylum or other form of international protection.

Please read in full all documents referred to.

Non-English language information is comprehensively summarised in English. Original language quotations are provided for reference.

#### *Structure/objective of the Mehdi Foundation*

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief mentions the Mehdi Foundation International (MFI) in a February 2008 addendum to her report as "a multi-faith institution utilizing mystical principles of Mr. Ra Gohar Shahi" (UN Human Rights Council, 28 February 2008, p. 27).

In its 2000 annual report, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) states:

"Riaz Ahmad Gohar Shahi, head of a sufi-like sect, was sentenced to life imprisonment u/s 295-A, 295-B, 295-C by a court in Mirpurkhas (Sindh). Two other cases were pending." (HRCP, 1 January 2001, p. 50)

In November 2008, the Indian news agency PTI reports on the MFI as

"a multi-faith spiritual organisation that promoted the doctrine of divine love since 1980. The organisation was headed by Ra Riaz Gohar Shahi, who had fled the country and is presently based in United Kingdom (UK) after Sindh High Court sentenced him to life imprisonment on charges of blasphemy." (PTI, 20 November 2008)

According to a January 2006 article by The Sunday Telegraph, though, Gohar Shahi died in 2003 ("three years ago", The Sunday Telegraph, 15 January 2006), whereas the news agency Pakistan Press International (PPI) reports in December 2001 on the burial of Gohar Shahi, "Spiritual figure and founder of Anjuman-e-Sarfarooshan-e-Islam International", on 12 December 2001 (PPI, 8 December 2001).

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No further information on the structure of the Mehdi Foundation could be found among the sources consulted by ACCORD, except from the Mehdi Foundation (MFI) itself.

Several MFI websites could be found, that are also interlinked; i. a.:

[www.goharshahi.com](http://www.goharshahi.com), [www.theawaitedone.com](http://www.theawaitedone.com), [www.mehdifoundation.com](http://www.mehdifoundation.com),  
[www.mehdifoundation.org](http://www.mehdifoundation.org), [www.imammehdi.gs](http://www.imammehdi.gs), [www.goharshahi.pk](http://www.goharshahi.pk), [www.alrtv.org](http://www.alrtv.org),  
[www.alr-news.com](http://www.alr-news.com), [www.hatifemehdi.com](http://www.hatifemehdi.com)

and "The Official MFI Blog": <http://rariazgoharshahi.blogspot.com> which states to be operated by "Younus AIGohar [...] Chief Executive of Mehdi Foundation International" (MFI Blog, no date).

According to an undated "Introduction to MFI", published on goharshahi.com and written by "Chief Executive His Holiness Younus AIGohar", the MFI is

"an interfaith non-religious spiritual intuitional organization. [...] MFI comprises of people belonging to various religions and faiths. The common interest between the assorted members [...] is the bond of divine love, and miraculous Doctrine of His Holiness Ra Riaz Gohar Shahi." (goharshahi.com, no date A)

On the same website, under "contacts", information can be found on MFI representatives and various MFI branches, such as MFI Universal, MFI Pakistan, MFI Ladies Wing, MFI EU, etc. Younus AIGohar is stated to be MFI's Chief Executive, Hassania AIGohar President, and Steve Paul Bell General Secretary. As for MFI Universal, Younus AIGohar is listed as Chief Executive, Haji Mohammad Ashfaq as Chairman, Amjad Gohar as President, and Qayyum Riaz as General Secretary. See website for more information on other branches and representatives<sup>1</sup>. (goharshahi.com, no date B)

The "Introduction to MFI" mentioned above also contains information on MFI's objectives:

"MFI endeavours to wipe out hatred from the society and from the lives of all humanity. [...] In short, MFI aims to bring about divine love, and root out hatred from the hearts and lives of all human beings." (goharshahi.com, no date A)

In the same text, MFI also distances itself from radical Islam and terrorism (goharshahi.com, no date A; see also The Sunday Telegraph, 15 January 2006). MFI's "Constitution", a list of policies, prohibitions and directions for MFI members, is also published on goharshahi.com. Note that "Homosexuality" is listed as prohibition #2 (goharshahi.com, no date C).

Both documents, the Constitution and the Introduction, are attached to this response in PDF-format for your convenience.

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<sup>1</sup> On the website, click on both occurrences of "Mehdi Foundation International" on top of the list to see all information.

### *Perception of this movement/sect in Pakistan*

The following section contains information on various events concerning the Mehdi Foundation International (MFI), ordered chronologically:

As mentioned above, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) states in its 2000 annual report:

"Riaz Ahmad Gohar Shahi, head of a sufi-like sect, was sentenced to life imprisonment u/s 295-A, 295-B, 295-C by a court in Mirpurkhas (Sindh). Two other cases were pending." (HRCP, 1 January 2001, p. 50)

For details on the Penal Code's Sections by the HRCP, see the Penal Code as published on UNHCR's Refworld (Pakistan Penal Code, 1860).

This conviction is also briefly reported by the US Department of State (USDOS) in its Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2000 (USDOS, 23 February 2001) and by The Sunday Telegraph in January 2006:

"Before his death three years ago Gohar Shahi claimed that he had met Jesus. He was charged with blasphemy in Pakistan in 1999 but fled to Britain. In 2000 he was given three life sentences in his absence." (The Sunday Telegraph, 15 January 2006)

According to a June 2004 article by Pakistan Press International (PPI), the Sindh Government imposed a ban upon circulation of a leaflet entitled "Hum Nay Gohar Shahi Ko Imam Kioon Mana" (PPI, 11 Juni 2004). According to a December 2005 article by PPI, the Sindh Government imposed a ban on an Urdu Poster entitled "Riaz Ahmed Gohar Shahi – Imam Mehdi Al-Muntazir", purportedly issued by Anjuman-i-Sarfroshan-i-Islam. The article continues:

"According to an official handout released here Saturday, the poster calls upon people to recognize Riaz Ahmed Gohar Shahi as Imam Mehdi and contains material causing resentment among Muslims. The government has therefore declared that all copies of the poster are liable to be forfeited to the government with immediate effect, the handout said." (PPI, 17 December 2005)

In August 2005, the Pakistani newspaper The Nation reports the federal interior ministry directed the Sindh Government "to seize and forfeit the monthly magazines 'Hatif-e-Mehdi' and 'The voice of Mehdi,' authored by banned Gohar Shahi, under section of 99-A of criminal procedure code":

"It was further informed that the Home Secretary Sindh Brig(r) Ghulam Muhammad Mohatarem, has issued the notification No SOJ-1/12-17/05 and directed the Inspector General IGP Sindh Asad Jahangir Khan to take instantaneous legal action against the alleged writer, publisher and distributor of material along with its translations in any magazine.

The magazines contain alleged matter, which is objectionable and maliciously intended to outrage the religious feelings of the Muslims and these should be seized, the sources concluded. [...]

The Sindh government, notified 321 religious activists and personalities of different banned outfits and organisations including the four, who returned from US detention centre in Guantanamo Bay, in accordance with the list of schedule- IV of Anti Terrorist Act (ATA). The Sindh government has also included around 40-50 new names of various religious groups and organisations, in lieu with the current circumstances." (The Nation, 19 August 2005)

The article continues with information on the consequences for a person placed on "Schedule IV" (see attached article for details).

In December 2005, the news agency UPI and the Pakistani newspapers Daily Times and The Nation, citing Pakistan police sources, report alleged links between the Gohar Shahi group and "self-proclaimed 'Imam Mehdi'" Shahbaz Khan (The Nation, 19 December 2005; UPI, 27 December 2005; Daily Times, 28 December 2005). According to The Sunday Telegraph, Shahbaz Khan was involved in a hostage-taking incident (The Sunday Telegraph, 15 January 2006). However, concerning links between Shahbaz and the Gohar Shahi group, The Sunday Telegraph states:

"There is no suggestion that leaders of the Gohar Shahi religion either organised [Shahbaz] Ahmed's actions in Pakistan or knew what he and his disciples were planning." (The Sunday Telegraph, 15 January 2006)

According to an April 2007 article by The Times of India, around 70 Pakistani nationals were arrested during protests organized by MFI in India. They were demanding action against the Pakistan government:

"Around 70 people who claimed to be Pakistani nationals staged a dramatic demonstration against the Pakistan government at Jantar Mantar on Monday afternoon [23 April 2007].

They burnt Pakistani flags and their passports, along with effigies of President Pervez Musharraf and Muttahida-Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) leader currently visiting India, Maulana Fazlur Rahman. Refusing to return to their homeland, the alleged Pakistanis asked for asylum in India.

The protesters were taken into custody at Parliament Street police station since they had burnt their passports, which is an offence under the Foreigners Act 1946. Police later said legal action would be initiated against them under the same Act. [...]

The rally with 150 participants was taken out by a spiritual organisation called the Mehdi Foundation International, which claims to have branches all over the world, including one in Pakistan. Demanding action against the Pakistan government, which they said was

supporting Islamic militancy, leaders of the organisation said Pakistan should be declared a terrorist state." (The Times of India, 25 April 2007; see also PTI, 3 August 2007)

These arrests are also mentioned by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief in a February 2008 addendum to her report<sup>2</sup>. The report mentions claim that in Pakistan MFI members are not allowed to practice their beliefs, that they were tortured there and that blasphemy cases against 250 MFI members have been initiated in Pakistan:

"100. [...] These 65 persons have Pakistani nationality and are currently detained in Central Jail Tihar, New Delhi, India. The three last-named persons were born during the past three months in Central Jail Tihar. Currently, a total of ten detainees are under six years of age.

101. According to the information received, the first-named 62 persons are members of the Mehdi Foundation International (MFI), a multi-faith institution utilizing mystical principles of Mr. Ra Gohar Shahi. They claim that in Pakistan MFI members are not allowed to practice their beliefs, that they were tortured there and that blasphemy cases against 250 MFI members have been initiated in Pakistan. In early 2007, they travelled from Pakistan to India intending to seek asylum. On 23 April 2007, they staged a protest demonstration at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, at which they burnt the Pakistani flag as well as their passports and visa papers. In the absence of valid visa and other travel documents, they were arrested by the local police and sent to Central Jail Tihar.

102. [...]

103. The 65 above-mentioned persons are at risk of imminent forcible return to Pakistan. In view of blasphemy and treason charges they may face there, the Special Rapporteurs expressed their concern that their life and physical integrity may be at risk should they be returned to Pakistan." (UN Human Rights Council, 28 February 2008, p. 26-27)

The Special Rapporteur states she has not received a reply from the Indian Government concerning the allegations mentioned (UN Human Rights Council, 28 February 2008, p. 27).

In the same report, the Special Rapporteur mentions another case concerning the Mehdi Foundation. This case concerns MFI-members arrested in Pakistan in December 2005 and allegations of mistreatment in detention. They were sentenced by an Anti-Terrorism Court under section 295-A of the Pakistani Penal Code in July 2006:

"210. The Special Rapporteurs brought to the attention of the Government information they had received regarding Mr. Raja Fiaz, Mr. Muhammad Bilal, Mr. Nazar Zakir Hussain, Mr. Qazi Farooq, Mr. Muhammad Rafique, Mr. Muhammad Saddique and Mr. Ghulam Hussain. According to the allegations received, they are members of the Mehdi Foundation International (MFI), a multi-faith institution utilizing mystical principles of Mr. Ra Gohar Shahi. They were arrested on 23 December 2005 in Wapda Town and the police

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<sup>2</sup> This case is jointly raised in an addendum to a report by UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Manfred Nowak: UN Human Rights Council, 19 February 2008, p. 115-117.

confiscated posters on which Mr. Gohar Shahi was shown as 'Imam Mehdi'. On 13 July 2006, the Anti-Terrorism Court No. 1 in Lahore sentenced each of these persons to five years of imprisonment, inter alia, under section 295A of Pakistan's Penal Code for having outraged others' religious feelings. Since 27 August 2006, the seven men have been detained in Sahiwal Jail, Punjab, where they were forced to parade naked, hung up in the air and beaten. Their prisoners' records are posted outside the cell, falsely indicating that they had been sentenced on charges of blasphemy under section 295C of the Penal Code. For this reason, they are constantly threatened and intimidated by prison staff as well as by other detainees. One MFI member was targeted by several other inmates and sexually assaulted. Subsequently, also staff members sexually abused him and pushed burning cigarette butts in his anus, which left scars that can still be seen.

#### Observations

211. The Special Rapporteur regrets that she has not received a reply from the Government concerning the above mentioned allegations. They show that persons deprived of their liberty and members of religious minorities are in a particularly vulnerable situation and that the risk of abuse may even increase if individuals are members of several vulnerable groups. [...]” (UN Human Rights Council, 28 February 2008, p. 50; see also UN Human Rights Council, 19 February 2008, p. 216-217)

In January 2006, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) mentions the arrest of 50 MFI-members under blasphemy charges and reports of physical abuse in an open letter to President Bush, who met with Pakistan's Prime Minister:

“Blasphemy allegations, which are often false, result in the lengthy detention of, and sometimes violence against, Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, and members of other religious minorities, as well as Muslims on account of their religious beliefs. Prescribed penalties for blasphemy include death and life imprisonment, after proceedings which frequently lack due process. Just last week, 50 members of the 'Divine Love' Mehdi Foundation International community were arrested on blasphemy charges and are reportedly being subject to physical abuse while in detention. Some of those accused under the blasphemy laws have been attacked and even killed by vigilantes, including while in police custody; those who escape official punishment or vigilante attack are often forced to flee the country. Although amended in October 2004 with the aim of reducing the more maliciously applied charges, the procedural changes have not had a significant affect on the way the blasphemy laws are exploited in Pakistan.” (USCIRF, 20 January 2006)

Concerning the Pakistani nationals mentioned earlier, who belong to the MFI and were arrested in India in April 2007, the Indian news agency PTI reports on 20 November 2008 that an Indian court stayed a decision to deport them to Pakistan:

“Sixty seven jailed Pakistani nationals who were on the verge of being sent home by the Indian authorities may continue to remain behind bars as the Delhi High Court Wednesday [19 November] stayed the Centre's [federal government] decision to deport them.

The 67 Pakistani nationals, lodged in Tihar jail, are facing charges of allegedly staying in India without valid pass-port or documents.

Issuing notice to the Central government, a Division Bench of Chief Justice Ajit Prakash Shah and Justice S Muralidhar sought the government's reply within two weeks and stayed their deportation till further order.

On Tuesday, the government moved an application before a city court seeking its permission to withdraw all cases registered against them under the Passport Act and Registration of Foreigners Act and to deport them to Pakistan.

However, challenging the government's decision, one of the Pakistani national filed a petition seeking court's intervention restraining the government from deporting them.

Filing a Public Interest Litigation, through counsel Meenakshi Arora, one Saifullah Bajwa said all these people are facing cases of blasphemy and the existing Pakistani law prescribes the sentence of life or death penalty for the charge.

In April last year, these people had fled Pakistan due to fear of prosecution on the charges of blasphemy as they belonged to Mehdi Foundation, a multi-faith spiritual organisation that promoted the doctrine of divine love since 1980.

The organisation was headed by Ra Riaz Gohar Shahi, who had fled the country and is presently based in United Kingdom (UK) after Sindh High Court sentenced him to life imprisonment on charges of blasphemy.

After coming to India, they had staged a protest here at Jantar Mantar [in Delhi] against Pakistani government and burnt their passports besides burning the effigies of their leaders. The Delhi police had arrested them on April 23 2007 for not having valid documents to stay here." (PTI, 20 November 2008; see also APP, 20 November 2008)

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