

Acid attack on boy who 'refused sex with Muslim cleric'

By Massoud Ansari in Karachi

Last Updated: 9:05PM GMT 07 Feb 2004

On his hospital bed last week, 16-year-old Abid Tanoli sat listless and alone, half of his body covered by burns that all but destroyed both his eyes and left his face horribly disfigured.

The teenager talked, with difficulty, of how his life had been destroyed since the fateful day in June 2002 when he refused to have sex with his teacher at a religious school in Pakistan.

The boy was horrifically injured in an acid attack after he rebuffed the Muslim cleric's sexual advances. Now, he has alarmed Pakistan's powerful religious establishment by pressing charges against his alleged assailants.

A teacher at the school, who cannot be named for legal reasons, and two of his friends are in prison awaiting trial for attempted murder and rape. All three deny the charges. A fourth alleged attacker is still at large.

It is the first such case to be brought against a Muslim cleric and threatens to expose a scandal of sex abuse within Pakistan's secretive Islamic schools.

Abid was blinded and maimed in the assault, which he says came shortly after he rejected sexual demands from the Islamic teacher at a madrassa in a crowded, lower middle-class district of Karachi. "He threatened to ruin me for life," Abid recalled, "but I didn't take him seriously. I just stopped going to the madrassa".

Abid, who was 14 at the time, told neither parents nor friends what had happened because, he said, he was ashamed. A few days later, as he played with his brothers and sister at home, he said that his religious teacher - accompanied by three associates - broke into the house, bolted the door and threw acid over him, screaming: "This should be a lesson for your life."

Abid was taken to a public hospital, where doctors told him that he would be scarred for life.

Lawyers and campaigners against sexual abuse of children say that it is not uncommon in Pakistan, especially in the segregated surroundings of the country's estimated 20,000 religious schools, but cases involving members of the clergy are rarely - if ever - exposed.

"They are either hushed up and sorted out within the confines of school, or parents are pressurised not to report the incident to the media as it would give religion a bad name," said Zia Ahmed Awan, the president of Madadgaar, a joint project of LHRLA (Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid) and Unicef, the United Nations children's fund.

Haroon Tanoli, Abid's father, met strong resistance when he tried to take up his son's case with officials at the school. He says that they offered to help him secure a cash payment from the alleged attackers, provided that he did not involve the police. Since then, he has been threatened with harsh consequences for refusing to back down.

"I despise hypocrites who sport huge beards in the name of religion and hinder the passage of justice in the name of Islam," said Mr Tanoli.

"I had a beard, and all my four sons were studying in a madrassa. However, following this incident, the first thing I did was to pull my children out of the madrassa - and shave off my beard."

Even as Abid was receiving treatment, the religious authorities pressed the hospital to discharge him. Mr Tanoli

managed to get him admitted to a different hospital, where he is being treated free, although the family cannot afford an operation to save his sight.

Mr Tanoli refuses to back down, despite being offered one million rupees (£12,000) by the teacher's relations if he withdraws the charges. He has moved to a secret location for his own safety.

Related Content

More on Pakistan (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/>)

Sex killer Peter Tobin beaten up in prison (</news/newstopics/politics/scotland/4360519/Sex-killer-Peter-Tobin-beaten-up-in-prison.html>)

Oxford Street murder: Teenager in court (</news/majornews/1957308/Oxford-Street-murder-Teenager-in-court.html>)

Sally Anne accused 'attacked woman in past' (</news/uknews/1578410/Sally-Anne-accused-attacked-woman-in-past.html>)

Amanda Knox trial for Meredith Kercher's death to begin (</news/newstopics/politics/lawandorder/4535578/Amanda-Knox-trial-for-Meredith-Kerchers-death-to-begin.html>)

External Links

LHRLA (<http://www.lhrla.sdnpk.org/>)

Unicef (<http://www.unicef.org/>)

[Back to top](#)

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2009