

## Giant cross raises Christian spirits in Karachi

Edifice offers 'ray of hope' amid climate of fear.



---

Pakistan's tiny and downtrodden Christian community are taking heart from the construction of Asia's tallest cross in the country's most populous yet violent city of Karachi.

A 42.6-meter-tall concrete and steel cross is being erected at the entrance of Karachi's largest cemetery — Gora Qabristan — containing thousands of tombstones and graves.

Christian businessman Henry Pervez Gill donated the cross and is supervising the construction work, which is expected to end in six months' time.

In a city known for ethnic and sectarian violence, the construction of the huge cross has generated a lot of media attention in recent weeks.

Christians are also coming in large numbers to see the sacred symbol, according to Muhammad Ali, a Muslim builder working on the construction site.

“They [Christians] are obviously glad and feel pride at seeing the towering cross in Karachi,” Ali said.

“I understand that this is a sacred religious symbol for Christians. I feel good seeing the smiles on their faces.”

Joseph Masih, a Christian resident of the Star Gate area of the city, said the construction of the cross has lifted the morale of Christians amid a climate of rising extremism in the country.

“It is a matter of joy for us that Asia’s tallest cross is being erected in Karachi,” Joseph said.

“It gives a ray of hope for Christians, many of whom are fleeing the country due to security reasons,” he said.

At least 120 people were killed in twin blasts at a church in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar in 2013, while the country’s controversial blasphemy laws are being used as a weapon of persecution, religious minorities say.

Increasing attacks on the Christian minority have prompted many to flee the country.

Mehwish Gill, 28, a resident of Mehmoodabad district, said most of her family members had moved to Thailand and Sri Lanka because of security fears. This massive cross, however, tells us there is still hope in Pakistan and things can get better, she said.

Syed Mushtaq Ali Shah, a Muslim auto rickshaw driver who lives opposite the cemetery, said the cross was a reflection of interfaith harmony.

“I see no hate in general public for minorities. Some religious and extremist groups incite violence against the minorities for their vested interests,” he said.

“Yes, there have been attacks on minorities. But Muslims haven’t been spared either. Terrorists spare no one. More mosques and imambargahs have been attacked in this country than anything else,” he said.

Addressing fears the cross could become a target for religious extremists, Anwar Sardar, general secretary of the Karachi Christian Cemeteries Board (KCCB), which granted permission for the cross’ construction, said nothing was safe.

“Threats are everywhere in Pakistan and there is nothing we can do about it.”

ucanews.com reporter, Karachi