

Pakistan province demolishes Catholic church, despite protests

KARACHI, Pakistan (CNS) – A Catholic church serving more than 300 Christian families in Pakistan’s commercial capital of Karachi was demolished Aug. 24 despite resistance from a civil society group and warnings from U.N. human rights experts.

The Save Karachi Movement, a group of lawyers, human rights defenders, journalists and minority activists, confirmed the demolition of St. Joseph Church on its Twitter account. It was part of a larger demolition plan to prevent flooding, government officials said.

Ucanews.com reported the Save Karachi Movement said the anti-encroachment squad of the Sindh provincial government tore down the building, despite protests from the Christian community.

“This is how we treat our minorities. This is how we destroy what they built, their church. ... Watch and be ashamed, Pakistan! Government of Sindh, you will have to pay,” said Abira Ashfaq, a member of the Save Karachi Movement, while sharing a video of the demolition.

Mustafa Mehran, a lawyer, said two nearby churches had already been demolished and this was the last one remaining for the huge Christian population.

A day earlier, the Save Karachi Movement said it had managed to halt the demolition of the church.

“Thank you for participating in the campaign to #SaveStJosephChurch from demolition,” it said in a statement. “Due to our collective resistance, the church did not get

demolished today. But residents fear that it will get demolished in the coming days as soon as it loses traction on social media.”

Local officials claimed the demolition was launched after a court order to remove encroachments near two narrow streams passing through Karachi, locally known as the Gujjar nullah and the Orangi nullah, in the wake of the 2019 flash floods.

The anti-encroachment action along Gujjar nullah, a wastewater stream, may affect up to 12,000 homes housing 96,000 people, according to U.N. experts. According to available data, more than 66,500 people have already been affected, with 4,900 houses demolished in Gujjar nullah and 1,700 in Orangi nullah.

In June, U.N. human rights experts called on Pakistan to stop evicting close to 100,000 people living alongside the waterways.

According to a statement by the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, the anti-encroachment drive by city authorities was carried out “without adequate consultation with the affected residents, no relocation plan, and disparate and insufficient compensation for the displaced.”

“The legal basis for this mass displacement and the remedies available to those who are affected are unclear. What is clear is the horrid effect on the displaced population, putting many poor families out on the street in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic,” the U.N. experts said.

The U.N. experts have urged Pakistan, which is a member of the U.N. Human Rights Council, to ensure that its policies and practices are in full compliance with international human rights standards governing relocation, evictions and internal displacement.