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## Lahore attack points to a vicious trend

March 28, 2016



With more than 70 dead – mostly women and children – and over 300 injured, Sunday's suicide attack at a park in Lahore is one of the worst acts of terrorism to have taken place in Pakistan in recent years. Our hearts go out to the victims and their families.

The Taliban splinter group Jamaat Ul Ahrar said it carried out the attack and targeted Christians celebrating Easter. This indicates a dangerous trend.

Pakistan's minority communities are frequently targeted by extremists. Last year, suicide attackers struck a bus in Karachi carrying 40 Shiites, while suicide bombers attacked two churches in Lahore, prompting Christians across the country to stage violent protests.

One of the most worrying expressions of this intolerance came earlier this year. In 2011, the governor of Punjab Salman Taseer was assassinated by his bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri. Qadri said he did it because Taseer had spoken out against Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

In February this year Qadri was hanged, and an estimated 100,000 people attended his funeral, mourning him as a hero.

These incidents reflect not merely an intolerance towards some minority communities in Pakistan, but they suggest dangerous ruptures in society.

Pakistan is a diverse country, with religious minorities and many languages and dialects. They are all Pakistanis and it is the state's responsibility to ensure they are all able to participate in society and worship as they wish. It is important therefore not merely that the government responds promptly but that it sends the unambiguous message that such sectarianism will not be tolerated – on occasion, in the past, condemnation has come from the top without any commensurate concrete action.

To achieve peace and progress, Pakistan ought to take decisive action to end the growing religious intolerance. It is this phenomenon that is breeding many of the problems that the country is grappling with. Even pockets of intolerance can destabilise the country, and allow an opening for radical groups such as the Taliban. After such a tragedy, the response from Islamabad must be more than mere words.