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- [LETTERS](#)
- [PICTURE OF THE DAY](#)
- [CARTOONS](#)

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- [ePAPER](#)

ARTICLE #4

11 APRIL 2014

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- [NATIONAL](#)
- [ISLAMABAD](#)
- [PUNJAB](#)
- [SINDH](#)
- [Khyber Pakhtunkhwa](#)
- [Balochistan](#)
- [Gilgit Baltistan](#)
- [Azad Jammu & Kashmir](#)
- [REGION](#)

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## Forced conversions

We often have the perverse pleasure of reading in the papers or hearing on the news the cruel ways in which our minorities are targeted; everything from being bombed in their places of worship to being hunted like prey by target killers, our minorities have suffered it all. However, there are many more ways to torture them and it seems one is becoming depressingly popular: forced conversions, particularly of young minority girls. A new report by The Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan has released some very distressing numbers — as many as 1,000 girls, aged from 12 to 25, 70 percent of them Hindu and 30 percent of them Christian, are abducted every year, forcefully converted to Islam by their captors, married off to these men who usually rape them and, at times, also force them into prostitution and human trafficking. This is beyond barbaric; it is a true testament to the contempt with which we view our minorities. The report does not fail to mention that these numbers, which are quite large, are just the tip of the iceberg, as many such cases just do not get reported. The report documents that when the families of the victims do register an FIR and the case goes to court, the girl — traumatised and held hostage by her abductor, who is usually by now parading himself as her 'husband' — is too scared to admit that she is a victim and the whole case falls flat. If she does retaliate, she may very well be hurt or even murdered by said 'husband'. The accused lay blame on the families, saying that they are intervening in the wilful conversion of their daughters, wanting nothing more than to reconvert them. One can very easily see the games the captors are playing. The truly tragic aspect of this whole drama is that there is just no redress for these poor souls in the judicial system of this country. Such cases often see the victims give in to intimidation, rendering them forever apart from the families that can find no law that will side with them. No one listens and no one is willing to protect these vulnerable girls from such vicious predators. When one looks at cases such as these, it is soon realised that we have a huge blot on our face — we set up a homeland for the Muslims, promising to protect and care for our minorities, but we have forgotten all that we fought for and struggled against. When it comes to how we treat our minorities, we are vying for the 'honour' of being one of the worst countries in the world. \*

April 11, 2014

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