



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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September 7, 2012

The Honorable Robert Blake
Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia
Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Ambassador Blake:

Our Conference of Bishops has been following the case of Rimsha Masih with great concern. As you know, she is a young Pakistani Christian girl arrested August 16 on the charge of blasphemy for purportedly burning Islamic texts. We understand that because of her young age and her learning difficulties, the charges against her are being contested and may be dropped. But she remains in prison while she awaits a bail hearing on September 7.

Masih's arrest led to the evacuation of a Christian community as her family and neighbors left their homes in fear of mob violence. Despite a local imam having been arrested on suspicion of having fabricated the case against Masih by planting pages from the Quran in the bag she carried, it is not clear that she will be released because blasphemy cases elicit strong support from extremists.

This case is the latest in a series of highly controversial charges of blasphemy brought against individuals in Pakistan. Some of those who advocated for changes in blasphemy laws have been prominent individuals such as Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer and Federal Minister for Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti; both were assassinated, and in the case of Governor Taseer, his convicted killer has been hailed as a hero by some Muslim clerics. Often those accused of blasphemy are members of religious minorities, frequently Christian, who are targeted perhaps out of vengeance or greed. Those accused often must abandon homes, land, and livelihoods in an effort to protect themselves. Many accused of blasphemy, like Aasia Bibi, remain in prison. Even if exonerated, some are killed in mob violence.

Human rights abuses are part of the ongoing bilateral dialogue between the United States and Pakistan. The egregious case against Rimsha Masih, a minor, may present an opportunity to call again for review and reform of blasphemy laws. The National Commission for Justice and Peace of the Pakistan Catholic Bishops Conference called for the Pakistani government to stop "widespread human rights abuses against religious minorities especially those linked with the use/abuse of blasphemy laws" and for "all political parties to study the issue of blasphemy laws with facts on the ground." In the specific case of Rimsha Masih, the head of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, Cardinal Jean Louis Tauran, voiced support for her, saying since she apparently does not know how to read or write, "it seems impossible that a child could show scorn for the sacred book of Islam." The Cardinal called for more dialogue to keep the situation from worsening.

In light of long-standing U.S. policy in support of international religious freedom and human rights, we urge the United States to add its voice to the concern expressed by others in the international community that Pakistan should protect the human rights of all its citizens, especially religious minorities and other vulnerable people, like Rimsha Masih.

Sincerely yours,

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Most Reverend Richard E. Pates
Bishop of Des Moines
Chairman, Committee on International Justice
and Peace