

URGENT ACTION

PAKISTANI CHRISTIAN FAMILY AT RISK OF DEPORTATION

A Pakistani Catholic family – ages ranging from 11 to 57 - have been arrested for overstaying their visas in Sri Lanka. The family fled Pakistan when their lives were threatened and arrived in Sri Lanka seeking asylum. Amnesty International learnt on Friday, 31 May 2019, that they are currently detained in deplorable conditions and that there are plans to deport them immediately. Forcibly returning them to Pakistan will put them in harm's way, as safety for minorities has deteriorated in recent years.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Minister Tilak Marapana
Sir, Baron Jayatilaka Mawatha,
Colombo 00100
Sri Lanka

Emails: publicity@formin.gov.lk, cypher@mfa.gov.lk, sfa@mfa.gov.lk

Dear Minister Tilak Marapana,

I am writing to urge you to stop the deportation of a Pakistani Christian family from Sri Lanka, who have been arrested and are being kept at the refugee centre in Mirihana for overstaying their visas. **Naseem John, Nida John, Nobil Zain, Sylvester John, Hina Milword and Keshwan Milword** fled serious threats to their lives in Pakistan and were forced to seek sanctuary in Sri Lanka.

In addition to the trauma faced in their home country, the family had to endure the trauma of being displaced by violent mobs following the Easter Sunday attacks from their home in Dalupotha. They are currently being kept in terrible conditions, where the youngest member of the family has been separated from his mother because of the segregation in camps.

The John family should not be deported to Pakistan where more harm awaits them. I ask you to ensure that they have a safe place to stay with access to food and medicine.

There must be a fair process before a deportation, to properly evaluate the threat that these families might be exposed to upon return. No one should be forcibly returned to a country where they are at risk of serious human rights violations.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Refugees and asylum-seekers said they had lived peacefully in Sri Lanka, only ever encountering occasional hostility. However, this changed after the Easter Sunday attacks, which included a deadly attack on Negombo's St. Sebastian's Church, where more than 100 people were killed. The events since 21 April 2019 have left many of the affected refugees and asylum-seekers too afraid to venture beyond their temporary shelters, and even feeling that they are no longer safe anywhere in Sri Lanka.

As a result, since 22 April 2019, mobs of young and sometimes armed men began going door to door in the Negombo area, a city on the east coast of Sri Lanka, looking to evict refugees and asylum-seekers from Muslim-majority countries.

Safeguards for minorities are weak in Pakistan, particularly when it comes to the country's blasphemy laws. Pakistan's blasphemy laws are overbroad, vague and coercive. They have been used to target religious minorities, pursue personal vendettas and carry out vigilante violence. On the basis of little or no evidence, the accused struggle to establish their innocence while angry and violent groups of people seek to intimidate the police, witnesses, prosecutors, lawyers and judges.

This is exemplified by the case of Asia Bibi, a poor, Christian farmworker who spent 8 years on death row on false blasphemy charges. After Asia Bibi was sentenced to death in November 2010, two prominent politicians, Salmaan Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti took up her cause, calling on the then Pakistani President, Asif Ali Zardari, to pardon her. The danger of standing up for a poor, Catholic woman was brought to light when Salmaan Taseer, the Governor of Punjab, was assassinated by his own bodyguard in January 2011. Two months later, Shahbaz Bhatti, then the only Christian member of the cabinet, was shot dead outside his mother's home in Islamabad for taking up the cause.

Three years after accepting Asia Bibi's appeal for consideration, the Supreme Court acquitted her of all charges on 31 October 2018, citing insufficient evidence. After the ruling was announced, violent protests erupted in major cities in Pakistan. As a result, it was agreed that Asia Bibi's name would be added to the Exit Control List and that the Supreme Court would hear a "review petition" that sought overturning her acquittal. She was only able to leave 6 months after her acquittal.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 16 July 2019

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Naseem John (she/her), Nida John (she/her), Nobil Zain (he/him), Sylvester John (he/him), Hina Milword (she/her), Keshan Milword (he/him)