

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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EXTRA 14/95

Fear for safety / Death penalty

10 February 1995

PAKISTAN

John Joseph, Christian human rights activist

**Salamat Masih, aged 14, Christian
Rehmat Masih, aged 40, Christian**

Amnesty International fears for the safety of John Joseph, who is the key witness in an ongoing murder trial, the next hearing for which is due on 12 February 1995. The murder victim was a Christian charged with blasphemy, and Amnesty International is deeply concerned that on 9 February in Lahore, his co-accused, Salamat Masih and Rehmat Masih, were sentenced to death for blasphemy. Salamat Masih is 14 years old.

On 11 May 1993, a prayer leader of a mosque in Kot Ladha, near Gujranwala, Punjab province, lodged a complaint that three Christians, Salamat Masih, Rehmat Masih and Manzoor Masih had scribbled words on the wall of the mosque which were derogatory of the Prophet Mohammad. They were arrested on the same day on charges of blasphemy: an offence which carries a mandatory death sentence. Inflammatory posters calling for the death of the three men appeared soon after their arrest and processions began demanding that they be hanged. During trial hearings, Islamists shouted slogans and interfered with proceedings. The defendants' families and lawyers received death threats.

In an attack by Islamists in April 1994, Manzoor Masih, was murdered and Salamat Masih, Rehmat Masih and John Joseph, a Christian human rights activist who escorted them, were injured (see UA 137/94, ASA 33/02/94, 6 April 1994, and follow-up ASA 33/06/94, 8 June). The three assailants were arrested several days later, but though identified by several eye-witnesses, they were released on bail in an unusually lenient decision. The next hearing of the Manzoor Masih murder case is due on 12 February in Lahore. Amnesty International fears for the safety of John Joseph, who is now the key witness of the murder. He has received death threats from Islamists in Lahore who are reported to be celebrating the death sentences of the two Christians.

Amnesty International considers Salamat Masih and Rehmat Masih to be prisoners of conscience who should not have been tried at all; it believes that the charges were maliciously brought against them and that they may not have received a fair trial. Furthermore, Salamat Masih is reported to have been wholly illiterate at the time of the alleged offence. Since the complainant, the mosque's prayer leader, reportedly wiped away the offending words, there is no material evidence for the alleged offence. Although Salamat Masih and Rehmat Masih have the right of appeal to the High Court, they may have to spend many months as prisoners of conscience in death cells awaiting its outcome.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Reports indicate that, prior to the alleged graffiti incident in May 1993, Salamat Masih had argued with a neighbourhood boy over pet pigeons; the boy then told village elders that he had seen Salamat Masih write on the mosque wall. Salamat told the non-governmental Human Rights Commission of Pakistan that the complainant and other Muslim neighbours had beaten him severely to make them implicate Manzoor and Rehmat Masih. There appears to have been a history of petty clashes and hostility between the Christians and their Muslim neighbours.

In November 1993, Salamat Masih was released on bail, the two others were released in January 1994. On application of their lawyer, police protection was provided between the court and their lawyer's office. On 5 April 1994, on leaving their lawyer's office they were shot by three assailants riding by on a motor bike. Manzoor Masih died on the spot and the others were seriously injured. Salamat Masih, Rehmat Masih and John Joseph have since lived in hiding but their families and associates have received threats and there has been an arson attempt on the house of John Joseph.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express and airmail letters either in English or in your own language:

- condemning the death sentences passed on Salamat Masih, a child, and Rehmat Masih, both of whom are prisoners of conscience, and calling for their immediate and unconditional release;
- urging the government to take urgent and effective measures to protect John Joseph and others involved in this case from attacks by Islamists;
- calling for, at the very least, the introduction of procedural changes to prevent innocent people from being charged under the blasphemy law.

APPEALS TO

1. President Farooq Ahmad Leghari
Office of the President
Islamabad, Pakistan
Faxes: 92-51-811390
Telegrams: President Leghari, Islamabad, Pakistan
Salutation: Dear President

2. Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto
Office of the Prime Minister
Islamabad, Pakistan
Faxes: 92-51-821835
Telegrams: Prime Minister Bhutto, Islamabad, Pakistan
Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

3. Mr Nabi Dad Khan
Law Minister
Ministry of Law and Justice
Pakistan Secretariat
Islamabad
Telegrams: Minister of Law, Islamabad, Pakistan
Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES OF YOUR APPEALS TO:

to diplomatic representatives of Pakistan accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 17 March 1995