

URGENT ACTION

MAN SENTENCED TO DEATH FOR BLASPHEMY

A Pakistani man, Muhammad Ishaq, who lives in New York State, USA, has been sentenced to death for blasphemy in Pakistan.

A district court in Punjab province upheld Muhammad Ishaq's death sentence, which had been handed down to him in July 2009 by a court in his home town, Talagang, for insulting the Prophet Muhammad (section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code). He was also given a 10-year prison sentence and fined 200,000 Rupees. His lawyer is seeking to appeal the decision to the Lahore High Court.

Muhammad Ishaq has lived in the USA for around 30 years, but is a patron of Talagang's Sufi Pir Faisal Shah shrine. He had been visiting the town when he was accused by a man known only as Asadullah of claiming to be a messenger of God and getting local people to worship him. He was immediately arrested by local police.

A senior-superintendent of police in Talagang who investigated the matter refused to pursue the charges, saying he needed to maintain communal harmony in the town. The decision was challenged in the Chakwal District Court, but out of fear the verdict would provoke violence in the area, the case was moved to a court in neighbouring Jhelum District which eventually found Muhammad Ishaq guilty of blasphemy. He was refused bail by successive courts, including the Supreme Court, and he has been in prison since the accusations were brought over three years ago.

Muhammad Ishaq denies the charges of blasphemy, saying he never asked his followers to worship him, nor did he claim to be a messenger of God. A video has emerged showing local people touching his feet, a practice common in many parts of Pakistan and Sufi practitioners to signify respect. Muhammad Ishaq believes that members of a rival faction brought the charges in an attempt to take control of the Pir Faisal Shah shrine.

Please write immediately in English, Urdu or your own language:

- Calling on President Zardari to ensure immediately that Muhammad Ishaq is not executed;
- Calling on the authorities to release Muhammad Ishaq immediately, or else charge him with a recognizably criminal offence and try him in accordance with international human rights standards;
- Urging Pakistani authorities to fulfil the pledge to review and improve "laws detrimental to religious harmony", announced by Prime Minister Gilani in August 2009, and reform or abolish the blasphemy laws;
- Calling for an immediate moratorium on all executions in the country, with a view to eventual abolition of the death penalty.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 22 MARCH 2012 TO:

President

Asif Ali Zardari
Pakistan Secretariat, Islamabad,
Pakistan
Fax: +92 51 920 4974
E-mail: publicmail@president.gov.pk
Salutation: Dear President Zardari

Chief Minister, Punjab

Mian Mohammad Shahbaz Sharif
Chief Minister Punjab
Chief Minister's Office
7, Club Road, GOR I
Lahore, Pakistan
Fax: +92 42 9920 5065
Salutation: Dear Chief Minister Sharif

Minister of Law

Rana Sanullah
3 Patiala House GOR 1
Pakistan
Fax: +92 42 9920 1064
Salutation: Dear Minister Sanullah

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please insert local diplomatic addresses below:

Name Address 1 Address 2 Address 3 Fax Fax number Email Email address Salutation Salutation

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Pakistan's current blasphemy laws were first introduced during British rule in the 19th century and were amended in 1982 and 1986 by the military regime of General Zia ul Haq to make the defiling the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad criminal offences, punishable with life in prison and death respectively. The laws are vaguely formulated and arbitrarily enforced by the police and judiciary. Religious minorities have been disproportionately accused of blasphemy, but the majority of victims are mainstream Muslims, reflecting the danger these laws pose to all members of Pakistani society and the rule of law.

Charges brought against individuals under the blasphemy laws are often founded on the individuals' minority religious beliefs or unfounded accusations stemming from personal enmity, frequently aiming to imprison people to gain advantage in business or land disputes. Police frequently fail to record and investigate complaints and justice is impeded by judicial bias against religious minorities. Many of those accused or suspected of blasphemy have been assaulted or tortured. Some people detained on blasphemy charges in prisons have been killed by fellow detainees or prison wardens. Others suspected of blasphemy, but not under arrest, have been unlawfully killed without police taking any action to protect them. In 2010 Pakistan's Council of Islamic Ideology, a constitutional body mandated to advise the state on Islamic issues, called for the blasphemy laws to be reformed, citing these concerns. Although the government in 2009 pledged to review "laws detrimental to religious harmony" like the blasphemy laws, it fell silent after the Governor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, and Minorities Minister, Shahbaz Bhatti, were assassinated, in January and March 2011 respectively, in part because of their criticism of the blasphemy laws.

Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code makes it an offence punishable by death or life imprisonment to 'defile' the Prophet Mohammed. The Federal Shariat Court, whose tasks include reviewing laws to ensure they conform to Islamic doctrine, ruled in 1990 that anyone convicted of blasphemy should face the death penalty, not life imprisonment. The Government appealed, but dropped the appeal in 1991. People found guilty under section 295-C have been sentenced to death ever since but no one has yet been executed.

Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights set out that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, opinion and expression. International human rights law provides that any limitations placed on these freedoms should be only such as are prescribed by law as well as being necessary and proportionate for, among other things, the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

Name: Muhammad Ishaq
Gender m/f: m

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