

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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Further information on EXTRA 14/95 (ASA 33/02/95, 10 February 1995) and follow-up (ASA 33/04/95, 17 February) - Fear for safety / Death penalty

PAKISTAN

John Joseph, Christian human rights activist
Salamat Masih, aged 14, Christian
Rehmat Masih, aged 40, Christian

Salamat Masih and Rehmat Masih were yesterday acquitted of the charge of laspheymy, overturning a death sentence imposed on them on 9 February. The appeal against conviction was heard by a two-judge bench of the Lahore High Court. Rejecting the prosecution evidence, Judge Arif Iqbal Bhatti said that it seemed "some elements were trying to create provocation and mischief." He stated "This is a landmark judgement...the decision is based on law, our consciences and keeping in view the fact that we are answerable to God and his last Prophet (Mohammad)". Welcoming the news, defence lawyer Hina Jilani told Amnesty International "Justice has been done; it is long overdue."

Amnesty International welcomes the acquittal of Salamat Masih and Rehmat Masih but continues to be concerned for their safety and urges the government to provide adequate protection for them when they are released from Kot Lakhpat jail in Lahore. Others involved in the case including family members, lawyers, judges and human rights activists also received death threats and Amnesty International urges the government to take effective measures to protect them also.

Asma Jehangir, another member of the team of defence lawyers involved in the case, stated "I expected this decision - but this is not a time for celebration.

The case is not the issue. The real issue is the need to change the blasphemy laws, which have been hi-jacked by alleged 'orthodox' believers who are in fact terrorists"

Amnesty International continues to urge the government of Benazir Bhutto to introduce legislation which would prevent further abuse of the blasphemy law and similar miscarriages of justice; the government had, in early 1994, announced such changes but failed to pursue them when Islamists protested. The safety of John Joseph, the key eye-witness in the case of the murder of Manzoor Masih continues to be a matter of serious concern. He remains in hiding and always in the presence of several male members of the community for protection. Amnesty International continues to urge the government to take urgent and effective measures to protect John Joseph and others involved in this case from attacks by Islamists.

FURTHER RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express and airmail letters

- welcoming the news that Salamat Masih and Rehmat Masih have been acquitted of blasphemy, overturning the death sentences imposed on them both;
- urging the government to take urgent and effective measures to protect them, John Joseph and others involved in the case from attacks by Islamists;
- calling for the amendment, and at the very least, the introduction of procedural changes in the blasphemy law to prevent further such miscarriages of justice.

APPEALS TO:

1. President Farooq Ahmad Leghari
Office of the President
Islamabad, Pakistan
Faxes: +92 51 811390 (can be difficult to get through)
Telexes: 54058 PSPUB PK
Telegrams: President Leghari, Islamabad, Pakistan
Salutation: Dear President

2. Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto
Office of the Prime Minister
Islamabad, Pakistan
Faxes: +92 51 821835 (can be difficult to get through)
Telexes: 5742 PMH PK
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, Pakistan
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 7 April 1995.