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Pakistan: Girl accused of blasphemy remains at risk despite bail

Today's decision by a Pakistan court to grant bail to Rimsha Masih, a 14-year old Christian girl accused of blasphemy, is an encouraging step, but the Pakistan government must urgently reform its blasphemy laws to prevent similar cases in the future.

Rimsha and her mother were first arrested by police on 16 August after an angry mob had gathered outside their house in Islamabad, accusing her of burning pages of the Quran, a crime punishable by death under Pakistan's blasphemy laws. The case took another turn last week when police arrested a local cleric, accused of planting the burned Quran pages on Rimsha. This morning, a judge set a bail of 1 million Pakistani rupees (about £6,200) for Rimsha.

Although Amnesty International welcomes the judge's decision, serious challenges remain. Rimsha, her family, and her Christian community in Islamabad remain under serious danger despite her being granted bail and even if she is eventually found innocent.

In the recent past individuals accused of blasphemy have been killed by members of the public, often in incidents where the victim has not been formally charged by the authorities. Hundreds of Christians have fled Rimsha's neighbourhood in Islamabad since she was accused, fearing violence. Her family remains in hiding.

The Rimsha Masih case highlights the profound danger to communal harmony and rule of law caused by Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Such cases will continue to occur, especially against vulnerable religious minorities, unless the Pakistan government urgently reforms the blasphemy laws to ensure they cannot be used maliciously to settle disputes or enable private citizens to take matters into their own hands.

Amnesty International calls on Pakistan authorities to also ensure that all perpetrators of attacks on religious minorities, including those who incite the community to do so, are brought to justice in trials that meet international fair trial standards, without recourse to the death penalty.

Amnesty International welcomes the condemnation of the charges brought against Rimsha Masih by a wide cross-section of Pakistan society, including even from religious leaders who have in the past vilified religious minorities and advocated strict application of the blasphemy laws, including the imposition of the death penalty.

But more important are legal, policy and social reforms to address the general climate of vilification on the basis of religion that has led to almost daily intimidation and deadly attacks on Christian, Shi'a, Ahmedi, Hindu and other minority communities across the country.

The Pakistan authorities must take concrete steps to show that no one can commit abuses and attempt to excuse them as the defence of their religion.