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NEWS SERVICE ITEMS: EXTERNAL - **PAKISTAN** (this item is being sent to international media)

NB: The third page of the document, i.e the letter written on behalf of Salamat Masih, can be used a part of the news release if you wish.

INTERNAL - **AUDIO VISUAL NEWS 3**

PLEASE NOTE: The date on the Barbados news release should be 20 February 1995. (NS 35/95)

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TARGETED AND LIMITED NEWS RELEASES

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE - 21 FEBRUARY 1994
AI INDEX: ASA 33/WU 03/95

PAKISTAN: CHILD DEFENDANT SHOULD BE PROTECTED FROM ISLAMISTS' ATTACKS AND IMMEDIATELY RELEASED

A 14-year-old Pakistani boy and another Christian sentenced to death for blasphemy on 9 February should be immediately released and protected, Amnesty International said today.

"Death threats and insults both inside and outside the Lahore High Court, where their appeal is being heard, underscore our concern that all those associated with this blasphemy case are in danger --- whether they are minority Christians like Salamat Masih and Rehmat Masih or their Muslim lawyer and other human rights activists opposing the imprisonment of the two prisoners of conscience," Amnesty International said.

Earlier disruption in the proceedings make Amnesty International fear that the convicts may not get a fair hearing at the appeal level. Amnesty International believes that the original trial of Salamat Masih and Rehmat Masih was unfair:

- the original charges of blasphemy were maliciously brought against them due to hostility towards the Christian minority;
- Islamists demonstrated throughout the trial for the death of the defendants; and
- there was no material evidence for the alleged offence, since the mosque's prayer leader reportedly wiped away the offending words.

On 20 February the main prosecution witness withdrew; the evidence on which the conviction now stands is fragmentary and contradictory. Observers of the hearing report that on that day Pakistani police effectively dispersed crowds outside the court and the hearing was not interfered with.

Amnesty International views the government's measures to ensure orderly proceedings and prevent mob disruption as a positive step. The organization reiterates its call to remain vigilant against any attempts by Islamists to issue death threats and to take the law into their own hands.

"One of the defendants has already been killed in attacks by Islamists," Amnesty International said. "Urgent steps are needed to stop further killings. We also fear for the safety of the convicts in Kot Lakhpat Jail, where another Christian charged with blasphemy died in mysterious circumstances three years ago."

The abuse of Pakistan's blasphemy laws can occur because of the lack of adequate legal safeguards, such as ensuring that a magistrate reviews such cases before arrest and formal prosecution, and making the abuse of the blasphemy laws itself an offence. The government announced such changes early in 1994, then dropped them in the face of Islamists' protests. Amnesty International strongly recommends such reforms be adopted.

"Any magistrate who would have reviewed Salamat Masih's case first would have seen how flimsy the charges were and dropped the case before the illiterate child was arrested for writing allegedly offensive words," Amnesty International said.

At the centre of the controversy is a very frightened young boy, said Amnesty International, which had a representative speak with Salamat Masih in November 1994, while on a research mission to Pakistan. Salamat Masih indicated the scars on his hand where two bullets struck him during the attack that killed Manzoor Masih. When asked about the many months in hiding, after he was released on bail, he told Amnesty International:

"Yes, I am very afraid. They have already killed Manzoor... and I am very afraid of another attack. I like to be in the open and fly pet pigeons. I feel disturbed that I cannot live normally and meet friends. I can't express this but I am very alone."

When asked about the hardship of constantly moving from safe house to safe house out of fear for his life, Salamat Masih agreed it was difficult but said: "What is more important than to live?"

Background

On 11 May 1993, a prayer leader of a mosque in Kot Ladha, Punjab Province, lodged a complaint that Salamat Masih, Rehmat Masih and Manzoor Masih had scribbled words on the wall of the mosque that insulted the Prophet Muhammad. Salamat Masih, who was then aged 12, was wholly illiterate at the time of the alleged offence.

The three Christians were immediately arrested, but later released on bail and granted some police protection. However, on the way from the court in April 1994, Manzoor Masih was murdered. The assailants, identified by witnesses, were arrested but later released on bail in an unusually lenient decision. The main eyewitness to the killing, Christian human rights activist John Joseph, has since then received death threats from Islamists in Lahore; his safety remains a concern for Amnesty International.

Observers of the 16 February hearing in the death sentence appeal say that defence lawyer Asma Jahangir could not even address the court over the shouted insults by Islamist lawyers. The mob outside demanded the death of the defendants, their lawyers and Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan's Prime Minister, who had expressed "shock and surprise" at the death sentences. The car of defence lawyer Asma Jahangir was smashed as she attempted to leave the court and police did not effectively control the mob.

ENDS\

Amnesty International has received a letter dated 26 January 1995 that was written on behalf of Salamat Masih, thanking Amnesty International members for their support. The text is reproduced in full below:

"Thank you ever so much for your letter of December 22, 1994. Thanks to the sustained efforts of Amnesty International and a host of other organizations, I feel that my contact with the free world has not been severed. I have received thousands of cards, facilitation messages and well-wishing letters from all over the world. I was delighted to get the drawings from the children. Please thank them all on my behalf. It is this immense love which is given me great hope for the future. It may pleas (sic) to know that I am fully confident of becoming a free person very soon. My elders Rehmat Masih and the wife of late Manzoor Masih join me in thanking all the people who have remembered us on Christmas and on the occasion of new year. Once again please thank all of those thousands of children and adults who have flooded us with facilitation, best wishes and messages of support. Thank you indeed. Salamat Masih

AUDIO-VISUAL NEWS 3

Women and Human Rights Campaign

ENR: The ENR is ready and will be distributed to sections as normal this week. If you have queries about whether you are receiving it and when it will arrive, please contact Anne Jenkins in the AV Resources team, on Ext: 5585.

Amnesty International has unrestricted international broadcast rights to use the ENR for one month from 7 March - so please make sure that any tv stations you give the tape to know this.

Much of the footage in the ENR belongs to AI, but some of it belongs to different tv companies, for which we have bought temporary broadcast copyright for different lengths of time. Please call Paula, Ext: 5560, if you wish to know the copyright agreements on this footage and which bits belong to us.

LAUNCH VIDEOS: A list of selected films about women and human rights which sections may wish to use in place of a campaign video is being sent out to sections in a Campaign Circular this week (contact Hilary Payne with queries, Ext: 5748).

CAMPAIGN VIDEO: We have commissioned Midge Mackenzie, who has an impressive track record both as a film director/producer and as an activist on womens issues, to make a 20-minute 16mm film on Women and Human Rights for AI. Unusually the film will not be a documentary, but instead is intended to be an emotional and issues-led piece, mixing black-and-white film with colour and including dramatization and reconstructions. It is principally intended to convey the power of women activists and their struggle, AI as relevant to that struggle and also the human rights violations that women are particularly vulnerable to.

The film will be ready in time to be launched at the ICM in Slovenia in August and at the Beijing film festival during the UN Conference on Women in September. We also intend to simultaneously make video versions of it in Arabic, English, French and Spanish for AI members to use, which will be distributed in the normal campaign video way.

We would like to target film festivals and arts cinemas around the world with the film and are making it in a way that will allow it a long shelf-life (ie. not tied down by the Beijing conference, etc). Midge Mackenzie will be a great help on targeting film festivals as she has organized such events herself and has good contacts, however please contact Paula if you know of film festivals that are coming up or if you have any ideas of how we can place it.

Syria Mini-ENR

The research team on Syria returned from a mission to Jordan a few weeks ago bringing some good footage of Syrian families talking about their "disappeared" sons and daughters (one mother is in the Women ENR) and an interview with a former POC. We do not have enough money to buy any extra footage of Syria, but intend to roughly edit what we have into a mini-ENR to be released to international tv agencies on 11 April when the Section Level Action is launched. We do not have the resources to distribute this to all sections in the usual way, but if you believe you can use it with your tv stations, please contact Anne Jenkins (Ext: 5585) to order a copy, saying which format you need.