

Christian Woman Freed from Muslim Kidnappers in Pakistan

A Christian mother of seven here who last August was kidnapped, raped, sold into marriage and threatened with death if she did not convert to Islam was freed this week.

After she refused to convert and accept the marriage, human traffickers had threatened to kill Shaheen Bibi, 40, and throw her body into the Sindh River if her father, Manna Masih, did not pay a ransom of 100,000 rupees (US\$1,170) by Saturday (March 5), the released woman told Compass.

Drugged into unconsciousness, Shaheen Bibi said that when she awoke in Sadiqabad, her captors told her she had been sold and given in marriage.

"I asked them who they were," she said. "They said that they were Muslims, to which I told them that I was a married Christian woman with seven children, so it was impossible for me to marry someone, especially a Muslim."

Giving her a prayer rug (musalla), her captors – Ahmed Baksh, Muhammad Amin and Jaam Ijaz – tried to force her to convert to Islam and told her to recite a Muslim prayer, she said.

"I took the musalla but prayed to Jesus Christ for help," she said. "They realized that I should be returned to my family."

A member of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Lahore, Shaheen Bibi said she was kidnapped in August 2010 after she met a woman named Parveen on a bus on her way to work. She said Parveen learned where she worked and later showed up there in a car with two men identified as Muhammad Zulfiqar and Shah. They offered her a job at double her salary and took her to nearby Thokar Niaz Baig.

There she was given tea with some drug in it, and she began to fall unconscious as the two men raped her, she said. Shaheen Bibi was unconscious when they put her in a vehicle, and they gave her sedation injections whenever she regained her senses, she said.

When she awoke in Sadiqabad, Baksh, Amin and Ijaz informed her that she had been sold into marriage with Baksh. They showed her legal documents in which she was given a Muslim name, Sughran Bibi daughter of Siddiq Ali. After Baksh had twice raped her, she said, his mother interjected that she was a “persistent Christian” and that therefore he should stay away from her.

Shaheen Bibi, separated from an abusive husband who had left her for another woman, said that after Baksh’s mother intervened, her captors stopped hurting her but kept her in chains.

Her father, Masih, asked police to take action, but they did nothing as her captors had taken her to a remote area between the cities of Rahim Yar Khan and Sadiqabad, considered a “no-go” area ruled by dangerous criminals.

Masih then sought legal assistance from the Community Development Initiative (CDI), a human rights affiliate of the European Center for Law & Justice. With the kidnappers giving Saturday (March 5) as a deadline for payment of the ransom, CDI attorneys brought the issue to the notice of high police officials in Lahore and on March 4 obtained urgent legal orders from Model Town Superintendent of Police Haidar Ashraf to recover Shaheen, according to a CDI source.

The order ultimately went to Assistant Sub-Inspector (ASI) Asghar Jutt of the Nashtar police station. Police accompanied by a CDI field officer raided the home of a contact person for the captors in Lahore, Naheed Bibi, the CDI source said, and officers arrested her in Awami Colony, Lahore.

With Naheed Bibi along, CDI Field Officer Haroon Tazeem and Masih accompanied five policemen, including ASI Jutt, on March 5 to Khan Baila, near Rahim Yar Khan – a journey of 370 miles, arriving that evening. Area police were not willing to cooperate and accompany them, telling them that Khan Baila was a “no-go area” they did not enter even during daytime, much less at night.

Jutt told area police that he had orders from high officials to recover Shaheen Bibi, and that he and Tazeem would lead the raid, the CDI source said. With Nashtar police also daring them to help, five local policemen decided to go with them for the operation, he said.

At midnight on Sunday (March 6), after some encounters and raids in a jungle area where houses are miles apart, the rescue team managed to get hold of Shaheen Bibi, the CDI source said. The captors handed over Shaheen Bibi on the condition that they would not be the targets of further legal action, the CDI source said.

Sensing that their foray into the danger zone had gone on long enough, Tazeem and Jutt decided to leave but told them that those who had sold Shaheen Bibi in Lahore would be brought to justice.

Fatigued and fragile when she arrived in Lahore on Monday (March 7), Shaheen Bibi told CDN through her attorneys that she would pursue legal action against those who sold her fraudulently into slavery and humiliation.

She said that she had been chained to a tree outside a house, where she prayed continually that God would help her out of the seemingly impossible situation. After the kidnappers gave her father the March 5 deadline last week, Shaheen Bibi said, at one point she lifted her eyes in prayer, saw a cross in the sky and was comforted that God’s mighty hand would release her even though her father had no money to pay ransom.

On four previous occasions, she said, her captors had decided to kill her and had changed their mind.

Shaheen Bibi said there were about 10 other women in captivity with her, some whose hands or legs were broken because they had refused to be forcibly given in marriage. Among the women was one from Bangladesh who had abandoned hope of ever returning home as she had reached her 60s in captivity.

Masih told CDN that he had prayed that God would send help, as he had no money to pay the ransom. The day before the deadline for paying the ransom, he said, he had 100 rupees (less than US\$2) in his pocket.