

Pakistani Court Acquits Christian Woman of 'Blasphemy'

On Wednesday a court in Gujranwala, Pakistan, exonerated a Christian woman of "blasphemy" charges after authorities had pressured her into making a false confession, according to the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS).

Rubina Bibi arrived in Lahore yesterday after Additional and Session Judge Mohammad Asghar Khan in Wazirabad district set her free in Gujranwala, Punjab, said CLAAS National Director Joseph Francis.

Residents of Alipur Chatta, Gujranwala district in Punjab Province accused her of blaspheming Muhammad on March 20. Police arrested her on March 21 under Section 295-C of Pakistan's widely condemned "blasphemy" laws, accusing her of having spoken ill of Muhammad during a quarrel with a local resident. She was sent to Gujranwala district jail along with her son, Yashwa.

Punjab provincial legislator Tahir Naveed Chaudhary, Sargodha area head of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA), said that on March 20 the mother of three had purchased some edible fats from a Muslim woman, Seema Bibi, but asked

for a refund when she found they were impure.

Seema Bibi began threatening her and speaking derogatorily of Christ, Christians and Christianity, Chaudhary said. In her false confession on April 6, Rubina Bibi said under duress that she was not used to hearing such contempt about herself and her faith and responded by insulting Muhammad.

“Her statement of confession was under pressure, and we obtained her new statement in the presence of lawyers in which she said that she did no such thing,” Francis said.

After hearing evidence in two previous hearings, the judge ordered the investigating officer to appear in court yesterday. Bashir of CLAAS, which took up Rubina Bibi’s case on March 30, offered an extended argument from previous case law, and Khan acquitted her, Francis said.

“We are once again in need of your prayers for the safety of Rubina, her husband Amjad Masih and her three kids,” Francis said. “Though she is acquitted by the court of law, even then it will be very difficult for Rubina’s family to live at their home among the Muslim extremists – they will have to move to some safe place.”

Following the July 19 killing of two Christian men accused of blasphemy, the Rev. Rashid Emmanuel and his brother Sajid Emmanuel, outside a courthouse in Faisalabad, CLAAS has arranged high security for Rubina Bibi and her family, Francis said. She and her husband also have two daughters, 5-year-old Elena and 3-year-old Eliza.

Initially police in Alipur Chatta tried to keep rights groups from discovering the detention of Rubina Bibi, a Christian leader said. Alipur Chatta police denied that they had detained Rubina Bibi when Khalid Gill, Lahore regional coordinator of APMA, inquired about her, Gill told Compass.

Gill said a radical Muslim relative of the accuser, Sabir Munir Qadri, had turned the quarrel into a religious issue in which the Christian could be sentenced to death or life imprisonment with a large fine.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws have gained international notoriety for their misuse by Muslims to settle personal grudges. Police initially told Compass that the First Information Report was sealed and no further information would be released to any person or news outlet. Inspector Asif Nadeem, station house officer of Alipur Chatta police, declined to speak to Compass in spite of

repeated efforts to contact him.

The case comes on the heels of the March 3 sentencing in Kasur of a Christian couple to 25 years in prison under Section 295-B of the blasphemy laws for defiling the Quran. Ruqqiya Bibi and her husband Munir Masih had been arrested by Mustafabad police in December 2008 for touching Islam's sacred scripture without ritually washing.

In Karachi, a court on Feb. 25 sentenced another Christian, Qamar David, to 25 years in prison and a fine of 100,000 rupees (US\$1,170) after he was convicted without basis for sending blasphemous text messages in May 2006. David was convicted under Section 295-A of the blasphemy statutes for "injuring religious feelings of any community," and also under Section 295-C for derogatory remarks against Muhammad.

His lawyer, Pervaiz Aslam Chaudhry, told Compass that the conviction was without basis as all 16 witnesses at the trial said that not David but the owner of the cell phone through which they received the blasphemous messages was guilty.

Maximum punishment for violation of Section 295-A is life imprisonment, and

for Section 295-C the maximum punishment is death, though life imprisonment is also possible. David received the sentence of life in prison, which is 25 years in Pakistan. He had not been granted bail since his arrest in 2006.