

Asia Bibi Living in 'Hell Hole' in Pakistan Prison

Friends of the ALIVE network of churches (supported by Open Doors) in Pakistan have done research into the circumstances in which Christian mother Aasiya (Asia) Bibi is being held in prison.

What if you were imprisoned:

- With 42 murderers, 30 drug addicts, 21 robbers, 12 kidnappers, and other criminals in your block.
- And you spent your days in solitary confinement far away from your husband and children.
- Only because you expressed your faith in Jesus?

Such is life for Asia Bibi in Pakistan. In 2009, Muslim women tried to chase her away from a well because—as a Christian—she “polluted the water.” Asia responded by saying that Jesus had rescued her and then added: “What has your prophet done for you?”

Fast forward six years, and Asia is the most famous Pakistani prisoner. She is currently the only woman on death row.

People close to the case have told OPEN DOORS' partner ministry ALIVE about the conditions of inmates in the Multan Jail. The women's block in Multan is a single-story building and does not have any system of cross ventilation. There are sets of two beds placed on one another in a vertical manner to double the capacity. There are a total of 6 unhygienic toilets which are, in the words of a former prisoner, “not sufficient for the number of inmates.”

The prison block has capacity for only 30-40 prisoners; however, around 150 inmates are being held. Of these, several spend their days in solitary confinement.

“Multan’s summers are extremely hot,” the former prisoner says. “Combine this with overcrowding, poor sanitation, heating, lighting, and ventilation in the jail, and you realize the hell hole where Asia’s single cell is located.”

Angry with Allah

Eye witnesses told ALIVE that most female prisoners are angry with Allah but are afraid at the same time. A program was developed in the prisons that requires them to read the Quran. They must sit in front of the Quran for hours. They rock back and forth regardless of whether they can comprehend what they are reading. They are told that if they learn a significant portion of the Quran by heart, they will get their prison sentence reduced, as well as please Allah and receive his forgiveness.

It is not just the sound of the five times of prayer that Asia is surrounded by. Every waking hour she hears the wailing of broken and often mentally disturbed women mixed with the sound of the Quran being read out loud. Prison is no quiet place.

There’s no evidence that Asia—hers being a “blasphemy case”—is being treated worse than other prisoners. In fact, because her case is so high profile, she may even be better taken care of, though only slightly. Her life is still terrible. Guards are used to taking their frustrations out on Christians, and perhaps she sometimes bears the brunt.

Asia is separated from the other inmates. This means she has her own toilet and is able to cook. However, as one can imagine, the standards of hygiene are very bad. It’s no surprise that after six years in prison, Asia fell seriously ill this year. For normal sickness, medicines are available in jail, and “favorite prisoners” are privy to them.

Sometimes this makes way for drugs to come into the prison as well. For critical illness and expensive treatment, no

arrangements exist. Often, this negligence results in the death of sick prisoners. The judicial magistrate and superintendent are quite indifferent about prisoners succumbing to their sickness.

Prisoners like Asia are never allowed to go outside. Asia has only traveled to court and to the hospital since she was locked up in Multan Jail.

The Sound of Children

She must be very lonely. Usually, prisoners in solitary confinement are not allowed to see any visitors. It's unlikely she is able to meet with her husband and/or children. If she does, they will never be left alone by the guards. Talking openly or slipping messages is out of the question. She must miss her children terribly. Many fellow inmates have children in the prison. They stay with their (single) mothers until the age of seven. Their crying and occasional laughter often fill the corridors.

What are the effects of this kind of imprisonment on the soul? A Pakistani trauma counselor says, "Someone like Asia Bibi would not have been prepared for the trauma of this long-term separation from her loved ones. When she comes out and is free from the shackles of this sentence, she will suffer much mental pain, and it will be a long healing process for her. The evil of injustice, unfair punishment, and separation from her family will have eroded her sense of what is normal. She will need to rebuild it tenderly with fragile care and concern from her loved ones.

"If there was only something for her to do, something to keep her busy, something to read or something else that would provide stimulation for her brain and body, but there is no form of vocational training and education in the prison. She is alone with her thoughts and prayers. We do not know if she has a Bible, but it is seldom the case. It gives me comfort

that Jesus is called Emmanuel, God with us, because I am comforted that Asia is not alone.”

Pakistan is ranked No. 8 on the Open Doors 2015 World Watch List () of the worst persecutors of Christians.