

‘Blasphemous’ Texts Land Christian Life Sentence in Pakistani Prison

A Christian man in Pakistan has been given a life sentence for sending “blasphemous” text messages to Muslim clerics.

Addition District and Sessions Judge Mian Shazad Raza sentenced 28-year-old Sajjad Masih to life in prison and a fine of 200,000 rupees (about \$2,000) Saturday in Pakistan’s Punjab province.

Masih was arrested in December 2011 for allegedly sending blasphemous text messages to Muslim clerics of Gojra in Toba Tek Singh, about 125 miles from Lahore.

According to *Christian Today Australia*, attorney Javed Sahotra told *Morning Star News* that prosecutors at the court in the Toba Tek Singh District did not produce any evidence that Masih had committed blasphemy.

Sahotra said Masih had repeatedly avoided arrest but went to the Gojra city police station to record a statement on Dec. 18, 2011.

“The police refused to let him leave and put him behind bars,” Sahotra said, adding that Masih’s case was registered under Section 295-C of Pakistan’s widely condemned blasphemy laws, which call for death or life in prison of anyone found guilty of blaspheming Islam’s Prophet Muhammad.

Christian leaders had accompanied Masih to the police station, but Sahotra said officers removed Masih from his cell after they left and started beating him.

“They hung Masih upside down in a room and tried to force him to confess that he had indeed sent those text messages,”

Sahotra said. "A naked electric wire was tied around his feet, and he was threatened with electrocution if he did not do what the police wanted."

Officers did not carry out the threat against Masih but instead sent him to Toba Tek Singh Prison.

The attorney blames the situation on young Muslim men who had plotted against Masih to "punish him for being friends with a local Christian girl." Prosecutors argued that the woman, Roma Masih, had broken off a marriage engagement with Sajjad Masih and that he had used a mobile phone SIM card bought under her name to send blasphemous messages in revenge.

Tariq Saleem, the complainant in the case, lives near Roma Masih's former neighborhood. Under cross examination, he admitted he had not received any blasphemous text messages as he had originally claimed, Sahotra said.

"The complainant backtracked from his statement during cross examination—Saleem told the court he had been forced by the police to file the case," Sahotra explained.

Still, Raza convicted the young Christian. Sahotra pointed to further lack of evidence, including the fact that Masih was in his office in Pakpattan during the time he was accused of purchasing the SIM card.

"We even submitted affidavits of Masih's co-workers in court in support of our claim," Sahotra said.

In addition, police did not produce the SIM card or the mobile phone from which the text messages were sent, and officers failed to retrieve the service provider's call data records.

Masih is one of many Christians who have been falsely accused of blasphemy in Pakistan, which is nearly 96 percent Muslim. Christians make up just percent of the population.