

Christian Acquitted of Blasphemy Charge in Pakistan

A Pakistani Christian falsely charged of blasphemy "after rescuing his 8-year-old nephew from a beating at the hands of Muslim boys" has been cleared of the charge.

Dildar Masih, a 27-year-old father of two young children, was acquitted on March 26 after prosecutors failed to produce any evidence against him, he said.

"I was produced in court three times during the case proceedings, but not one accuser ever turned up at the hearings," Masih told Compass by phone. "You cannot imagine my joy when the prison officials told me that I had been acquitted by the court. I had not been taken to the hearing that day; only my lawyer, Javed Raza, and father were present in the courtroom."

His nephew, Ihtesham (also known as Sunny), had gone out to fetch ice when Muslim boys from a nearby *madrassa* (religious school) beat him for refusing to convert to Islam in village No. 68 AR Farmwala, in Khanewal district's Mian Channu area in Punjab Province, on June 10.

Seeing the attack from a distance, Masih shouted and rushed to the scene, rescued his nephew and then went to his work as a painter. Soon after the incident, a Muslim mob of about 55 led by village prayer leader Qari Hasnain besieged Masih's house and ordered his father, Yousaf Masih, to hand over "the blasphemer" to them.

Yousaf Masih said that Hasnain claimed to have heard Dildar Masih "abusing Islamic holy words" as he was standing in the entrance of his mosque near the site of the incident. Hasnain later telephoned clerics in neighboring villages, and they called on all Muslims to "come out for the defense of Islam"

after Friday prayers (see, "Pakistani Families Flee after Another Bogus 'Blasphemy' Charge," June 15, 2011).

Unaware of the declarations emanating from the mosque, Dildar Masih had no idea why the Islamic throng arrived at the house he was painting and "pounced on him like tigers," his elderly father told Compass.

Police registered a blasphemy case against Dildar Masih, No. 211/11 under Section 298 of the Pakistan Penal Code and Section 16 of the Maintenance of Public Order, later that night after a crowd of about 2,500 Muslims gathered outside the police station and demanded officers hand him over to them.

He told Compass that he could scarcely believe his ears when he learned that he had been acquitted and would be released that same day. He said that there had been instances when Muslim prisoners and junior jail officials at the Multan Central Jail had tried to vent their anger at him, "but some prisoner or another would intervene in the situation and tell them that I was not guilty of blasphemy and thus saved me from being beaten up."

Masih said that during his imprisonment, he stood by his faith that Jesus would free him from the false charge and that he would be able to return to his family.

"I prayed a lot ... This was the only other thing I did in prison besides having food and sleeping," he said. "I kept on telling God that I had complete faith in Him and would wait for the day when He would set me free."

After being released from jail—so full of joy that he forgot several of his belongings in his hurry to leave—Masih joined his family in a village where the entire clan has relocated after the incident.

"I haven't found work as yet, but I'm sure God will provide a

living for me very soon," he said. "It's so good to be back among my two children and wife ... And yes, I'm much more closer to God now."

He said he's witnessed the hand of the Almighty at work.

"About 13 people are currently imprisoned in Multan Central Jail under **blasphemy charges**," he said. "I was the only Christian, and probably the only one to have been able to return home in less than a year."