

Islamists Demand Death Penalty for Christian's 'Blasphemous' Text Message

Tensions are high in the Punjabi city of Gojra after a court sentenced a Christian man, Sajjad Masih, to life imprisonment for blasphemy, only weeks before the fourth anniversary of an outbreak of extreme violence against Christians in the same city.

In August 2009, seven Christians from the same family were killed—six burned to death—and more than 100 Christian homes set alight by angry Muslims, again over an accusation of **blasphemy**.

Now, even as local Islamists demanded that Masih's life imprisonment sentence be exchanged for the death penalty, a further blasphemy case was lodged on July 20; police arrested a Christian couple who were sent to jail the next day.

On July 13, the Gojra Additional Sessions Court convicted Masih of committing blasphemy under Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code; for insulting Muhammad, which carries the death penalty.

Masih had been accused of sending blasphemous text messages in a case first lodged in December 2011. Despite an absence of evidence, the court sentenced Masih to life imprisonment (25 years in Pakistan).

The alleged text messages were sent from a SIM card registered in the name of Masih's former fiancée, Roma. Neither the cell phone nor the SIM was recovered from Masih during police investigation. Nor was there any eyewitness or forensic evidence available.

Analysts say lower court judges, who are provided little security in Pakistan, often concede to pressure from religious groups in **blasphemy** cases and convict the accused even if little evidence is available.

Some say this is the reason the judge awarded Masih life imprisonment (though not the death penalty) rather than acquitting him.

The day after the verdict, hard-line Islamists staged a sit-in on Mankanwala Crossing in Gojra and condemned the court's decision.

The protestors demanded Masih's death, chanting that nothing less than the death of a "blasphemer" was acceptable.

Banners were hung across the city which read, "Only one punishment for the blasphemer; sever his head from the body. ... Life imprisonment not acceptable, not acceptable and not acceptable."

This slogan has been promoted in recent years by Lashkar-e-Taiba (currently known as Jammāt-ud-Dawā after the US State Department branded Lashkar-e-Taiba a "foreign terrorist organisation" in 2001).

Inter-communal relations in Gojra are tense, especially with the approach of the fourth anniversary of the 2009 attacks. Christians told World Watch Monitor the area's radical Muslims were again seeking a pretext to attack Christians.

Catholic couple Shafqat, 43, and Shaguftah, 40, Masih* have also been accused of texting blasphemous messages to Islamic clerics.

Complainant Muhammad Hussein says he was offering tarawih (special prayers offered in Ramadan after the breaking of the fast) on July 18 in Talabwali mosque at around 10pm when his cell phone vibrated. He states that after finishing prayer, he

checked his cell phone and found blasphemous text messages insulting both Muhammad and the Qur'an.

Gojra City Police Station House Officer Muhammad Nisar told World Watch Monitor that Hussein's call data revealed the messages were sent from Shaguftah's cell phone number.

However, she told them that the cell phone had been lost for a month, and that she did not know who might have sent the alleged messages. Nevertheless, the Gojra City Police detained the couple, along with their four children, and pressured them to name someone who could have sent the messages.

Nisar told World Watch Monitor that a large number of Islamic clerics had been enraged when they heard of these text messages, and that they remained in the police station until the First Investigative Report (FIR) was lodged.

In what some say was an attempt to show that progress had been made, the police formally arrested the couple on July 20 and sent them to Toba Tek Singh District Jail the next day.

"Shafqat has admitted to the police he sent the blasphemous messages and gave this statement to the judicial magistrate," Nisar said.

Riaz Anjum, who is representing the couple, said the police have lodged the case under Section 295-B and 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, which recommend life imprisonment and the death penalty, respectively, for blasphemy.

"The police have extracted a confession from Shafqat, which is illegal," said Riaz Anjum, the couple's lawyer.

Anjum said the police had made stronger the case against the couple by recording Shafqat Masih's judicial confession. "Investigation should have been done by the senior superintendent before lodging the case, but here the police have extracted a confession from Shafqat which is illegal," he said.

He said the police have also charged the couple under 25-D of The Telegraph Act of 1985 which recommends a maximum of three years for intentionally “causing annoyance”.

Islamists again staged a sit-in on Mankanwala Crossing on July 23 and demanded death for the couple.

Shafqat Masih’s backbone was fractured in an accident in 2004. Since then he has been restricted to a wheelchair due to the paralysis of his lower body. He is also fitted with a catheter.

Since his accident, Shaguftah Masih has been the only breadwinner for the family’s four children, Ambrose, 13, Danish, 10, Sarah, 7, and Amir, 5.

Her brother Joseph told World Watch Monitor she is the eldest of six siblings.

At least three other cases have been registered previously against Christians based on blasphemous text messages.

In May 2006, Qamar David was accused of sending blasphemous text messages to various Islamic clerics in the city of Karachi. He was convicted in February 2010 and died in prison on March 15, 2011.

In January 2009 Hector Aleem and Basharat Khokhar were accused of sending text messages that hurt Muslims’ religious sentiment. They were acquitted of the charge on May 31, 2011.

Sixteen-year-old Ryan Stanton was charged with sending blasphemous text messages on October 10, 2012. He fled the country for refugee status in Sri Lanka.

Pastor Zafar Bhatti was accused of the same crime on November 11, 2012.

At least two Muslims, Abdul Sattar and Irfan Rafique, have also been charged for sending text messages.

Pakistani minorities and international bodies have long demanded an amendment or repeal of the blasphemy laws to avoid their misuse.

**'Masih', which derives from 'Messiah', is a common name among Christians in Pakistan.*