

Pakistani Christian Child Imprisoned for Blasphemy

An 11-year-old Pakistani Christian girl who was accused of desecrating the Quran is getting international attention.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is holding an international conference on Pakistan's **blasphemy law**. The September Geneva conference comes after the child, Rimsha Masih, who reportedly has Down syndrome, was imprisoned on charges of **blasphemy** related to burning pages of the Muslim's sacred text.

"The public hearing aims to heighten discussions at international levels on the deteriorating situation of the human rights of minorities in Pakistan and the misuse of the blasphemy law," says WCC official Mathews George Chunakara.

IRD's Pakistani source reports that Christian families in Masih's community have fled from their homes because of a mob that has threatened their lives on the basis of what is, at most, an error by a Christian serving maid burning what she mistook as discarded paper.

Faith J.H. McDonnell, religious liberty program director at the Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD), says at the best of times, the situation for most of Pakistan's Christians is deplorable.

"They live in extreme poverty and degradation, limited to the lowest of job and educational opportunity. But there is hardly ever a best of times," she says. "They always live under the Damocles sword of this abominable **blasphemy law**, never knowing when they could be accused, or what ridiculous issue will cause mobs to form."

McDonnell says it is inconceivable that human beings could

treat a little girl, let alone one with Down syndrome, in such a brutal manner. The IRD reports a mob was intent on killing Rimsha and other Christians in the community, unless she was turned over to the authorities and put in prison.

“Reports indicate that Rimsha was beaten. Only a month before, Islamists accused a mentally-impaired Muslim man of burning a Quran. A mob stormed the police station where the man was being held, dragged him out, and burned him alive,” McDonnell says.

“Pakistan has both signed on to and ratified the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. The treatment of Rimsha Masih is far from the rights afforded special needs children. Word that Pakistan’s President Asif Al Zardari has called on officials for a report on the girl’s arrest is a good sign. We hope and pray that he will intervene and that good Pakistani Muslims will speak out about these outrages.”