

Pakistani Christian on Blasphemy Charge Speaks Out From Prison

A Christian held in a Pakistani prison has told World Watch Monitor about the events surrounding his arrest and current detention.

In October, 26-year-old Adnan Prince (also known as Adnan Masih) was accused by a work colleague of insulting Islam, the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad. A conviction of blasphemy carries the death sentence or life imprisonment.

After his accusation, Prince went into hiding, but returned a month later after police arrested several of his family, including his brother and mother.

World Watch Monitor caught up with Prince from his jail cell in Lahore.

Prince's Story

It all started on Oct. 7 when Prince was filling in for his brother at the Diamond Glass shop in Lahore.

During his shift, Prince, who holds a master's degree in English literature, says he found a copy of a controversial book, *I asked the Bible why the Qurans were set on fire* (Urdu: *Mein ney Bible sey poocha Quran kyun jaley*), and started to read it and to make notes inside it.

The book was written by Maulana Ameer Hamza (the leader of Jamat-ud-Dawa, a political arm of the jihadi organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba, which claimed responsibility for the Mumbai bombings).

While Prince was reading the book, a Muslim colleague of his, Abid Mehmood, spotted him and took offense. The next day,

Mehmood went to the local police station and alleged that Prince had "marked several pages ... with abusive words against the Prophet of Islam."

Hearing that he had been accused, Prince fled. However, he claims that he did nothing wrong.

"I found the book quite erroneous, giving incorrect information about Christianity," he said. "So I wrote comments with biblical references in several places, but no abusive language was used."

After Prince had fled, his brother, mother, aunt and uncle were arrested and told they would not be released until he returned.

Hearing of his family's arrests, Prince returned home on Nov. 6.

Once at the police station, Prince said he was told to keep it quiet that he had been arrested on blasphemy charges, for fear of attacks by other prisoners. But he also said that police tortured him at night.

"The police were on the verge of killing me after I surrendered to them, but God kept me safe by His grace," he said. "When I came to my senses [after one round of torture], I was told that a heavy machine would be rolled over my thighs, which would not only be painful but would render me permanently impotent. Then the deputy superintendent of police pushed the barrel of a pistol into my mouth and told me to confess that I had written abusive words in the book. He said he would count to three and that if I didn't confess, he would pull the trigger."

Prince added that on one occasion he was taken outside and told that he was free to go.

"But I knew they were lying and would shoot me from behind if I left," he said. "I told them that if you want to shoot me,

then shoot me in the chest and not in the back. They stopped torturing me when they felt they would not be able to shake my resolve.”

Prince’s lawyer Aneeqa Maria, director of The Voice Society, told World Watch Monitor that the police were legally bound to present him before a court within 24 hours after his first arrest, but that they did not do so for fear of starting a riot.

“Every day dozens of bearded men crowded the courtroom where Adnan was to be presented, so the police kept lingering on,” she said. “After his surrender, a police officer told me about the pressure the police had on them from the Jamat-ud-Dawa, who wanted to take law and order into their own hands.”

Prince was brought before the court after three days, and then transferred to Lahore District Jail, where he is confined to a small cell on his own. He said that he was being kept away from other prisoners for his protection.

His trial has yet to begin. In the meantime, there is a petition in for him to be released on bail.

Similar cases have been known to take as long as seven years to reach trial. Perhaps the most famous on-going blasphemy charge case is that of Aasiya Noreen (also known as Asia Bibi), who was sentenced to death for insulting Islam in 2009 and still remains in jail, awaiting her appeal.

Christians Harassed

Before Prince turned himself in, a letter was sent to a Christian colony in Wassanpura, Lahore, near to where Prince lived, saying: “Every Christian household in this area is being told to immediately vacate their houses. This time you are verbally warned, but the next time you will be burned and killed.”

The letter was signed by Ashiqaan-Rusool (Devotees of the

Apostle), one of four Islamist groups in the area.

One of the Christians in the colony, Javed Masih, lodged a complaint with the local police.

"After Adnan and his family had fled from their houses, these extremists were looking for an excuse to attack us," he said. "For this reason about 12 families fled, while several other families sent their women to their relatives for fear of an attack from the Muslims."

Police stationed themselves outside the colony for a week, and then left. Following this, Masih submitted a petition to the court for continued protection.

On Nov. 25, the judge ordered the police to "readdress the grievance."