

Pakistani Christian Sentenced for 'Blasphemy' Dies in Prison

A Christian serving a life sentence in Karachi Central Jail on accusations that he had sent text messages blaspheming the prophet of Islam died today amid suspicions that he was murdered.

Qamar David's life had been threatened since he and a Muslim, Munawar Ahmad, were accused of sending derogatory text messages about Muhammad in June 2006, said David's former lawyer, Pervaiz Chaudhry (See "Pakistan's 'Blasphemy' Laws Claim Three More Christians," March 10, 2010).

David was convicted under Section 295-C under Pakistan's widely condemned blasphemy laws for derogatory remarks against Muhammad in a case registered at Karachi's Azizabad Police Station, with another case registered at Saddar Police Station pending. Maximum punishment for Section 295-C is death, though life imprisonment is also possible. On Feb. 25, 2010 he received a sentence of life in prison, which in Pakistan is 25 years, and was fined 100,000 rupees (US\$1,170).

Chaudhry, who said he was David's counsel until Islamic threats against his life forced him to stop in July 2010, told Compass that the Christian had expressed fears for his life several times during the trial.

"David did not die of a heart attack as the jail officials are claiming," Chaudhry said. "He was being threatened ever since the trial began, and he had also submitted a written application with the jail authorities for provision of security, but no step was taken in this regard."

Conflicting versions of his death by jail officials also

raised doubts.

A jail warden said David was reported crying for help from his cell today in the early hours of the morning. He said that David, who was breathing at the time, was transported to the Civil Hospital Karachi (CHK), but that doctors there pronounced him dead on arrival.

He also said, however, that he had heard from colleagues that David was found dead inside his cell and that his body had been sent to the hospital for post-mortem, not for treatment. Investigations are underway, he added.

Karachi Central Prison Deputy Superintendent Raja Mumtaz said David was shifted to CHK for treatment after jail staff members found him crying for help with "one hand on the left side of his chest." He said the prisoner was first taken to a local healthcare center, but that doctors there suggested that he should be taken to a hospital for proper treatment.

Mumtaz said that David was shifted to the hospital at around 10:45 a.m. today and was alive when he reached the hospital.

Sindh Inspector General of Prisons Ghulam Qadir Thebo insisted to BBC that David died of natural causes, saying he was housed in a Christian-only wing in which no Muslim prisoners had access to him.

"Our investigations have not yielded any evidence of foul play," Thebo told BBC. "There is no evidence to suggest he was murdered."

David's family reached Karachi today to take custody of the body. An impartial probe and autopsy report is awaited, as no jail officials were ready to say on record whether they had seen any visible injury on David's body.

David's son, Aqeel David, told Compass that the family had been informed only that his father had suffered a heart attack

and died while he was being taken to the hospital.

"We don't know anything besides this little piece of information that was given to us on the telephone," he said. "We are unsure about the circumstances surrounding my father's death because of the serious nature of the cases against him."

David's former attorney said that the trial in which David was convicted and sentenced was a sham.

"The judge acquitted Ahmad in this case, even though all 11 witnesses clearly pointed out his direct involvement in the incident," Chaudhry said.

In regard to the other blasphemy case registered at the Saddar Police Station, Chaudhry said he had cross-examined witnesses who had again accused Ahmad of mischief and absolved David of any wrongdoing.

"Ahmad's lawyer had filed an application for re-examining the witnesses when I withdrew from the case," Chaudhry added. "I stopped pursuing his cases last year because of serious threats to my life by Islamist groups who used to gather outside the courtroom."

Chaudhry said threats were made "both inside and outside the courtroom."

During the cross-examining of witnesses, he said, Senior Superintendent of Police Muhammad Afzal had also admitted that Ahmad was the real culprit and that David was arrested on the information of "some sources." Chaudhry said there was no relation whatsoever between Ahmad and his client before the trial started.

"They were complete strangers," Chaudhry said. "David was definitely framed in these cases."