

Pakistani Mother Condemned for 'Blasphemy' Stunned, Shattered

First woman sentenced to die for speaking ill of Muhammad says she never got to defend herself.

Ashiq Masih, with his stooped posture, frail body and dull yellow eyes, stands in a small compartment in the Sheikhpura District Jail with his three daughters – Sidra, Eesha and Eeshum. The girls are weeping silently.

On the other side of a metal grille is Asia Noreen, the birth mother of two of the girls and the first woman in Pakistan to receive the death sentence on charges of blaspheming Islam's prophet. Eeshum, 12-years-old and mentally disabled, whines like a baby for her mother, asking her when she will be back.

"I will be back," she says to her daughters, as they feel their mother's fingers through the gaps in the grille. "Don't you worry, now." But tears run down her face, too.

Arrested on June 19, 2009, Asia (alternatively spelled Aaysa) Noreen was accused of blaspheming Muhammad and defaming Islam. A judge under pressure from area Islamists convicted her under Pakistan's widely condemned blasphemy statutes on Nov. 8.

"I don't know why– when I walked into court that day, I just knew," she said, tears returning to her eyes and her voice shaking. "And when the judge announced my death sentence, I broke down crying and screaming. In the entire year that I have spent in this jail, I have not been asked even once for my statement in court. Not by the lawyers and not by the judge. After this, I have lost hope in any kind of justice

being given to me.”

In an interview with Compass at the jail northwest of Lahore, Punjab Province, Noreen said the triggering incident resulted from a “planned conspiracy” to “teach her a lesson” as villagers in Ittanwali, near Nankana Sahib about 75 kilometers (47 miles) from Lahore, resented her and her family because of a few mishaps.

“What my village people have accused me of is a complete lie,” she said. “I had previously had a row over a trivial issue of water running out of my house onto the street, and a man called Tufail verbally abused me. On June 14, when I was out picking *falsas* [a type of berry] with about 30 women, they again asked me to convert to Islam.”

Noreen said the women of the village frequently asked her to renounce Christianity while they worked in the fields, and that she refused each time.

“This time, too, I said that I saw no reason why I should leave my own religion,” she said. “They then asked me about Jesus Christ, and I told them to go and ask the local mullah and not to bother me with those questions.”

Meantime, one of the women asked her for water, she said. After she had fetched it, the others told the woman not to drink water brought by an “untouchable” and “dirty woman,” Noreen said.

“I asked them if Christians were not human – why the discrimination?” she said. “This annoyed them, and they started verbally abusing me. We were soon engaged in a heated argument.”

She said that five days later, a mob led by Qari (one who has memorized the Quran) Muhammad Saalim burst upon her after some

of the women told him about the incident in the fields. The mob pressured her to admit that she had blasphemed.

“They have been saying that I confessed to my crime, but the fact is that I said I was sorry for any word that I may have said during the argument that may have hurt their feelings,” she said.

Police arrived as they were beating her and took Noreen into custody, where they registered a case under Section 295-C of the blasphemy laws against her based on the complaint of the imam.

“They [police] registered a false complaint, because the complainant [Saalim] was never present at the scene,” she said.

Noreen said she has been heart-broken and shattered since the conviction. Her husband immediately tried to console her.

“Everything will be just fine, you just have to stay steadfast in your faith,” Masih told her. “All of us are here beside you. Everyone is praying for you.”

His words seemed to give her some hope, but she turned and asked Compass a question that no one has been able to answer for her.

“How can an innocent person be accused, have a case in court after a false FIR [First Information Report], and then be given the death sentence, without even once taking into consideration what he or she has to say?”

A pastor from Sharing Life Ministry who has been ministering to Noreen during her confinement and was present at all hearings told Compass that the judge had retired to his chambers three times before announcing the verdict.

“He was visibly tense” the pastor said. “The presence of a mob outside the courtroom was instrumental in the delivery of this harsh verdict.”

Sidra, about 15 years old and one of three children born to Masih from a previous marriage, indicated she was traumatized by the attack on her step-mother.

“I saw that mob burst upon my mother, slap her and beat her up,” she said, her eyes both sad and fearful. “I saw them push her hard against a wall and tear her clothes. They were abusing her. I went to free her from their grip, and I heard them say to my mother, ‘Admit that you said derogatory things about prophet Muhammad, and we will leave you alone.’ Why would my mother ever do anything like that?”

Noreen broke in, “Why was an FIR filed against me by Qari Saalim? Who is he? He doesn’t even know what I said or did.”

Noreen’s lawyers filed an appeal against the Nankana sessions court’s verdict in the Lahore High Court on Friday (Nov. 12), and the court is likely to take up the case soon.

Sidra said Muslim villagers have bullied her and others in the family. She said a man who has two children of his own beat Eesha.

Noreen said police have not harmed her, unusual for Pakistani suspects in blasphemy cases.

“I was never even mentally harassed by the police,” she said, adding that fellow inmates were also treating her well.

Sohail Johnson of the Sharing Life Ministry, which has been following the case from the onset, said authorities may have been aware that the sensitive nature of the case would

instantly bring it into public light.

Noreen said she has not lost faith in Jesus.

“He will rescue me from this fake case and I will return home – please ask everyone to pray for me,” she said as two prison guards arrived in the barrack to escort her back to her cell.

In spite of international attention, there has been little response from the government of Pakistan or civil society. No local organization has planned demonstrations to protest the verdict, which could set a dangerous precedent.

Shahbaz Bhatti, federal minister for minorities and a Christian, has written to the Punjab Province government requesting protection for Noreen and her family, both inside and outside jail. During the visit to Sheikhupura, however, Compass observed no special security measures for her family.