

Pakistani Mother Condemned for 'Blasphemy'

A female prison officer assigned to provide security for a Christian mother of five who was sentenced to death on "blasphemy" charges beat her earlier this month, sources said.

Sources in Pakistan's Sheikhpura District Jail said Asia Noreen, also known as Asia Bibi, was beaten on Oct. 5 by a prison officer identified only as Khadeeja, allegedly because of the Muslim officer's anti-Christian bias, while other staff members deployed for her security looked on in silence.

Noreen, mother of two children and stepmother to three others, was sentenced to death last November after her conviction for blaspheming Islam's prophet, Muhammad, after a verbal disagreement with some women in the village of Ittanwali, near Lahore.

The prison sources said Deputy Superintendent of Sheikhpura Jail Ghafoor Anjum did not initially take any action against Khadeeja for attacking Noreen – who is being kept in a special high-security cell due to serious threats on her life – despite learning about the incident immediately after it took place.

Khadeeja was later suspended for three months, and jail Superintendent Sheikh Khalid began an inquiry of her actions after an intelligence agency reported the matter to the Punjab Province government. The Home Department also sent a senior police official to Sheikhpura to investigate, and he recommended Khadeeja's immediate removal from service, sources said.

Based on communications with jail staff members, a source told Compass on condition of anonymity that Noreen had not received any life-threatening injuries, but that jail personnel had

apparently pressured the Christian woman and her husband to refrain from telling anyone about the incident. He said that although it was confirmed that Noreen had been beaten, prison officials have apparently pressured her and her husband, Ashiq Masih, to say only that the female prison officer got angry with Noreen over a trivial matter and that jail staff intervened in time before she could attack her; otherwise, Masih could lose his visitation rights.

“It seems that Ashiq has been pressured by the jail authorities to say that Khadeeja did not attack Asia,” the source said. “Why would the jail superintendent suspend Khadeeja for three months, and why would the inquiry officer recommend her removal from service, if she just ‘got angry with Asia’ over a minor issue?”

The source said that two false versions of the incident were circulating in the jail. Some staff members claimed that Khadeeja had asked Noreen to let her use the cell washroom and beat her when she refused, while others said that the guard had objected to the presence of some “prohibited articles” in Noreen’s possession and thrashed her when she refused to give them up.

“Both versions of the incident are absurd,” the source said. “Why did Khadeeja want to use the prisoner’s washroom when she could have gone to the staff restrooms? Asia’s the prisoner, not Khadeeja. Could anyone also explain how Asia managed to sneak in ‘prohibited items’ in her cell, and only Khadeeja objected to it?”

He added that the beating clearly showed the anti-Christian motive of the prison officer.

“The jail authorities are trying their best to hush up the matter as soon as possible, as it is a big embarrassment to the government,” he said.

The source said the attack reminded him that former Punjab

Gov. Salmaan Taseer, who along with Federal Minister for Minorities Shahbaz Bhatti was rallying for Noreen's release, was killed by his own security guard. Bhatti also was later slain for defending Noreen and opposing the blasphemy laws.

"There should be a more thorough vetting of people being assigned security duties," he said, adding that the staff members who witnessed the beating yet kept silent should also be suspended.

While reluctant to admit that the Muslim prison officer had beaten Noreen, a jail official acknowledged that Noreen had struck back in self-defense. Though adamant that Noreen was safe in custody, he said the incident had negatively affected her security and authorities were considering transferring her to another prison.

"It was an unfortunate incident, as we had been keeping Asia's location secret for the last many months, but this episode has blown our cover," a senior jail officer requesting anonymity told Compass. "We made the best possible arrangements for her security. She is kept in a separate cell with a closed circuit camera to monitor her security round-the-clock. More than 10 wardens have been especially deployed around her barrack. She has been strictly forbidden from eating anything offered by any unauthorized personnel. Asia is safe in our custody, and all possible efforts will be made to ensure her security."

Conviction under Section 295-C of the blasphemy law for derogatory comments about Muhammad is punishable by death, though life imprisonment is also possible. Section 295-B makes willful desecration of the Quran or use of an extract in a derogatory manner punishable with life imprisonment. Section 295-A prohibits injuring or defiling places of worship and "acts intended to outrage religious feelings." It is punishable by life imprisonment, which in Pakistan is 25 years.

Mumtaz Qadri, the security guard who murdered Taseer for his defense of Noreen and efforts to revise the blasphemy laws, was sentenced to death this month. After protests by Muslims in the street as well as by high-level Islamists, however, the judge who sentenced Qadri, Pervez Ali Shah, was removed from his post by the Lahore High Court.

The Rawalpindi Bar Association had threatened a nationwide strike if Shah was not suspended or transferred within five days.

The Islamabad High Court has agreed to consider Qadri's appeal of his verdict, thus suspending his death sentence until a ruling is made.