

Pakistani Muslims Convicted for Beating Christian to Death

Three Muslims convicted of killing a Christian in Pakistan's Punjab Province for refusing to convert to Islam last year have been given life sentences, according to attorneys for the European Centre for Law and Justice in Pakistan.

The Sessions Court in Mian Channu on July 7 convicted Ghulam Rasool, Amjad Iqbal and Kashir Saleem of torturing and killing Rasheed Masih on March 9, 2010, and sentenced them to life in prison, which in Pakistan is 25 years. The court also ordered each convict to pay 100,000 rupees (\$1,153) to Masih's family. A fourth suspect, Muhammad Asif, was acquitted.

"The ECLJ also plans to file an appeal in the Lahore High Court concerning the acquittal of the fourth defendant," said Asif Aqeel, director of the Lahore-based, ECLJ-supported Community Development Initiative. "The callous treatment by the police presented lots of challenges in proving that Masih was killed by the defendants. However, extensive work by our legal team in Pakistan and in the United States resulted in a conviction for the three defendants in this case."

Masih's family said they were grateful to ECLJ attorneys for assisting the court in making its judgments.

Aqeel said Masih's brother, Asi, said that Muslim businessmen were jealous of Rasheed Masih's success as a potato merchant in Mian Channu, Khanewal district because he was a Christian. When the 36-year-old victim met with the defendants at their farmhouse to discuss business on March 9, 2010, they asked him to convert to Islam. When he refused, the four Muslims beat him to death with iron rods, Aqeel said.

A bystander informed Asi Masih, who said he then called police.

Police officers along with the victim's brother found Masih smeared with blood. They rushed him to a hospital, but he died on the way after stating to police that he was tortured by Rasool and his accomplices, Aqeel said.

Police, however, denied that Masih ever gave such a statement and refused to charge or arrest the defendants, Aqeel said. A large number of Christians blocked an intercity highway and demanded that the killers be arrested. Police conceded after the Christian community's five-hour protest.

The Rev. Iqbal Masih of the Mian Channu Parish of the Church of Pakistan told Compass last year that Rasheed Masih was a devoted Christian, and that both he and his brother Asi had refused the Muslims' pressure to convert to Islam. The Muslims had been threatening both brothers for six months before the murder, according to Asi Masih.

An autopsy by Tehsil Headquarters Hospital Mian Channu revealed 24 wounds on the body of Masih, according to a copy of the report obtained by Compass.

The European Centre for Law and Justice, headquartered in Strasbourg, France, is an international Non-Governmental Organization dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights in Europe and worldwide.