

Pakistani Teen Accused of Blasphemy Granted Bail

A judge granted the Pakistani Christian teen arrested for **blasphemy** bail on Friday, days after a Muslim cleric was detained for allegedly planting evidence to frame her.

The teenager, however, may still stand trial after officials investigate accusations that she was blaspheming Islam, a “crime” punishable by death in Pakistan.

Rimsha Masih, a 14-year-old girl with mental disabilities, was arrested for defaming Islam on Aug. 16 after she was allegedly spotted by neighbors with a plastic bag containing burned pages of the Quran. After being held for more than three weeks at a high-security jail in Rawalpindi, Judge Mohammed Azam Khan set bail at 1 million Pakistani rupees, or about \$10,500, at a court hearing on Sept. 7.

The case took an unexpected turn on Saturday when Khalid Jadoon Chisti, a local imam, was accused by a member of his mosque of planting the burned pages in Rimsha’s bag with the intent to drive Christians out of his Islamabad neighborhood. The allegations likely influenced the judge’s decision.

Masih will remain in jail for at least one more day, said the girl’s lawyer, Tahir Naveed Chaudhry. “Surety bonds could not be submitted today because the court time has finished. We will submit the surety bonds tomorrow,” Chaudhry told the media. Masih’s family, who worked as street sweepers in an impoverished district of Islamabad, may need outside financial support to free her.

A decision on whether or not Masih will still have to stand trial for blasphemy will be made after an official investigation is completed, *The Guardian* reports. During Friday’s hearing, prosecutors attempted to block the bail and

challenged a medical assessment that determined Masih is legally a minor with mental disabilities.

If bail is paid, Masih will be reunited with her family at a secure location, Chaudhry said. However, it is unlikely that Masih will ever be able to return home.

“Once you have been accused of blasphemy it means the relocation of your family even if you are acquitted by the court,” the director of a Pakistan human rights organization in Lahore told International Christian Concern (ICC). “The people who were willing to burn Rimsha alive are now even angrier that their imam was [arrested] ... There is no way she can go back to the same place.”

Aidan Clay, ICC regional manager for the Middle East, said Masih should have never been arrested, and that all charges against her should have been dropped at today’s court hearing.

“Instead, her impoverished family is forced to pay a bail they cannot afford and Rimsha will never be able to return home. Because of false accusations made by radical and deceitful neighbors, Rimsha is forced to start a new life in a country that is no longer safe for her,” Clay says. “This all occurred as a result of Pakistan’s oppressive **blasphemy laws** that victimize innocent minorities by giving radical Muslims grounds to afflict vigilante justice in accordance to their own religious decrees.”

Although Masih will soon be free, for now, the battle will not be won until the Pakistani government repeals the country’s ominous blasphemy laws.

“How much longer must **Pakistani Christians** and other innocent minorities be thrown in prison and even executed on false allegations of blasphemy?” Clay asks. “No one should fear being killed by their government or burned by a mob simply because they are a member of a minority religious community.”