

Rimsha Masih Blasphemy Exoneration a First in Pakistan

Rimsha Masih and her family will remain in Pakistan after her legal ordeal is over, one of her lawyers says.

The teen-aged Pakistani girl, whose arrest in August on suspicion of desecrating Islamic texts, is due to appear in an Islamabad juvenile court Oct. 17. Originally charged in regular court where the potential penalty is life imprisonment, the girl's case was transferred to the juvenile court after her age was certified and evidence surfaced that she was framed by a local imam.

"We will ask the judge to quash the charges against her," attorney Tahir Naveed told Open Doors News.

And then, he said, the girl's family will try to settle back into something resembling a normal life.

"The family will live in Pakistan and they have already voiced their intention publicly," Naveed said. "For now it's certain that the family of Mizrek Masih will not seek asylum outside Pakistan. We will relocate them and also help in arranging employment for the father."

A report surfaced Tuesday that the family had been secreted away to Norway. But the minister of the Ministry of National Harmony, Paul Bhatti, denied the report.

"There's no truth in rumors that Rimsha has been moved to Norway," Bhatti told Open Doors News. "Mizrek Masih's family is in Pakistan and in our protection and they will be produced

in court, if required.” He said he is hopeful Rimsha would be cleared from charges at her Oct. 17 hearing.

Other Christians who fled Islamabad’s Meherabadi neighborhood to avoid Muslim anger over Rimsha’s alleged offense have tried to return home, too. Naveed, who is a member Punjab state Legislative Assembly, said his All Pakistan Minorities Alliance party is looking after the needs of returning Christians and that relations with Muslims are calm.

Not everyone sees it that way. “Some members of Rimsha’s congregation, who gathered last Sunday for worship at the church in the affected area, were stopped from playing the harmonium and tablas when they were singing hymns,” said a Christian pastor identified as Ahsraf, who said he provided shelter to several Christians fleeing from Meherabadi at his church in Islamabad’s Sector G-8. “The tension is pretty much out there.”

Ashraf said about 450 Christians took shelter in the 66 Quarters area of Awami Colony in the suburbs of the Islamabad.

“The Ministry for National Harmony promised to look after them but they were left high and dry,” he said. Some staged protests demanding that the ministry find them a safer settlement.

Arif Masih, a former resident of the area, said soon after Rimsha’s arrest a number of Christian organizations jumped in to offer shelter, “but most of them abandoned us one after the other.”

“Only a couple of organizations have helped to some extent,” he said. “One organization has agreed to finance resettling of about 75 families and they’ve said that they will rent out homes for another 25 families. It’s yet to be seen when this happens. The other organization resettled 10 families and

left.”

Christians who live some streets away from Rimsha’s home have returned to their homes, while those who lived closer to her home have preferred to relocate, said Napoleon Qayyum, a field director for World Vision in Progress, which describes itself as “a ground organization working for the rights of religious minorities in Pakistan.”

National Harmony Minister Bhatti said he had formed a committee to look into the matter, and the situation would be resolved soon.

“Almost 90 percent of Meherabadi’s Christians were living in rented homes, Bhatti said. “While many have returned to their previous abodes, some want to relocate to other areas for which the government is considering some proposals.”

For a moment, Pakistani Christians may have thought the apparent collapse of the case had opened a narrow window of opportunity to weaken the country’s anti-blasphemy law. Pakistan’s president, Asif Ali Zardari, used the Rimsha arrest as an opportunity to insist the blasphemy law must not be used as a cover to settle personal scores. Naveed said his party had started consulting other parties on proposals to reopen and reinvestigate all blasphemy cases.

That window slammed shut on Sept. 11, when a portion of the Islamic world erupted in outrage over the anti-Islam Internet video “Innocence of Muslims,” which portrays Muhammad as a womanizer and false prophet.

“Much progress had been made,” Naveed said, “but this film brushed everything aside.” The turmoil scuttled plans to bring the Masih family back to their home for a temporary visit, he said.

Qayyum, too, said the video undermined efforts being made to promote religious harmony.

“A church was burned down in Mardan by an anti-film mob,” he said. “They also burned down an adjacent school and a library, while the provincial government played the role of a silent spectator. Twenty-six people died in countrywide violent riots that day. The entire debate shifted to the film issue. A setback, indeed.”

This week in Islamabad, attention turns to Khalid Jadoon, imam of Meherabadi mosque, who is due in court Oct. 11, where he faces allegations that he planted the damaged religious texts into a bag Rimsha was carrying, to create a pretext for reporting her to police.

Three witness whose original testimony provided police with the evidence to arrest Jadoon recanted at an Oct. 1 court hearing. The witnesses, Khurram Shahzad, Hafiz Mohammad Owais and a man identified by the name Danish, told the judge the police had tortured them into recording their incriminating statements.

The Ramna police had recorded the statements of Owais, Shahzad and Danish under Section 161 of Criminal Procedure Code, in which they had endorsed the statement of Hafiz Zubair, a prayer caller at the same mosque who had testified against Jadoon before a magistrate.

On Sept. 23, sub-Inspector Munir Jaffri, the investigation officer in the blasphemy case, asked the court to clear Rimsha of the charge against her and instead charge Jadoon. Rimsha was granted bail and a day later was airlifted from Adiala jail in Rawalpindi to an undisclosed location.

Naveed said the backtracking of the witnesses would not cause much harm to Rimsha’s case because her innocence has been

established.

“The prosecution is trying its best to save Jadoon, but the case against him is watertight,” he said.

If so, it might open another window of opportunity.

“This is the first case of its kind when a person charged under the strict blasphemy laws is exonerated from the accusation,” Naveed said. “This case has also brought for the first time a debate on how these laws are misused to target innocent people.”