

Teen Accused of Blasphemy Never to Go Home Again

Rimsha Masih is likely to be cleared of the blasphemy charge against her, but never will be able to return home, her lawyer says.

Tahir Naveed Chaudhry, who has taken up the defense of the young Christian girl whose case has renewed international debate about Pakistan's notorious anti-blasphemy laws, said he is confident Rimsha will qualify for release on bail this week. The government, however, may ask the court to keep her in custody until tensions ease.

Naveed, a member of Pakistan's Punjab provincial assembly, also hinted that the **blasphemy** accusations against Rimsha may have been motivated partly by overtures toward her older sister being rebuffed.

"I am quite hopeful of securing Rimsha's release on bail," Naveed told Open Doors News. "A medical board has certified that she is 14, although her church record claims it to be around 11."

Under Section 7 of Pakistan's Juvenile Justice Ordinance, he said, Rimsha is not an adult and her case should be transferred to a juvenile court. Nor does she have the maturity to understand the concept of **blasphemy**, he said.

"The medical report has also supported our contention that her mental age is not compatible with her physical age," Naveed said. "Both official findings will help us in proving that the charges against her have been wrongly framed and she should be set free on bail immediately."

Rimsha, a resident of a poor Christian pocket of Islamabad, was reported to authorities Aug. 17 on the testimony of neighboring Muslims who accused her of carrying burned pages of Quranic verses. Little is known about how the girl came to be carrying burned religious texts.

Even so, police have said they placed the girl in jail both to placate angry demonstrators and to keep Rimsha safe from attack. Her parents likewise were removed to protective custody, while hundreds of Christian neighbors fled to the relative safety of more distant Islamabad sectors. Pakistan's president, Asif Ali Zardari, stepped into the matter, warning against vigilantism and ordering the interior ministry to investigate.

The accusations against the girl have renewed international condemnation of Pakistan's **anti-blasphemy laws**, which carry the potential of a life sentence for desecrating the Quran, and the death penalty for insulting the prophet Muhammad. Inside Pakistan, the laws enjoy widespread popular support, and prominent government officials who have advocated they be repealed have been killed.

Rimsha's defense, her lawyer said, pivots on the legal requirement that "willful desecration of the Quran" must be proved. In this case, Rimsha is both too young, and too mentally incapable, to carry out intentional defamation.

"The law clearly does not apply on her," Naveed said. "There was no willful desecration on her part. There is no way the poor child could have known what she is being accused of having done."

A medical board constituted by an "additional district magistrate" had found Rimsha's age to be around 14. On Tuesday, the judge instructed Naveed to file a fresh application requesting the court to order a new medical exam,

this time by a medical board convened by a more senior district magistrate. The judge observed that the first medical board had been constituted by the order of a lesser magistrate, and not by the court.

"I filed a fresh application as per the court's orders and requested the setting up of a medical board to determine Rimsha's age," Naveed said. "The court accepted my application and directed the district magistrate to constitute the board which will present its findings on Aug. 30."

The complaint against Rimsha was registered under the name of Malik Ammad, who Naveed said is the son-in-law of the man who owns the house in Meherabad in Islamabad's Sector G-12, where the girl lived with her family.

"Ammad does not enjoy a good repute in the locality," the lawyer said. "Rimsha's family shared with me that he had made several attempts to 'befriend' Rimsha's older sister but had been unsuccessful. This could be one of the reasons besides the discriminatory attitude of some of the locality's Muslims."

He said about 50 Christian families had been living among 500 Muslim families in the area for the last 15 years.

"Most of the Christians are laborers and their women work as maids in the nearby bungalows, while the Muslims have businesses in the area and own almost all property in the locality," he said. "Soon after the incident, a large number of Christians fled the area fearing violence as the Muslims threatened to burn down their homes but now the situation was improving and several families had returned to their residences."

Though he said he is hopeful the court will release Rimsha on bail and that she would soon be united with her family, Naveed

said he is equally certain the family will face more upheaval.

“As with every blasphemy accused, Rimsha and her family won’t be able to return to their home as it may put their lives at risk,” he said.

A government source told Open Doors News that intelligence agencies had warned authorities that setting Rimsha free at this stage could stoke religious tension.

“The agencies have advised the government to oppose Rimsha’s bail and keep her in custody until the matter cools down,” the source said, asking not to be named because of the sensitivity of the situation.

Regardless, Naveed said, “the government should release her and ensure the security of all Christians living in the area.”

Rimsha has found some support from Muslim quarters as well, with the leader of a prominent Islamist group calling for the release of the girl, if found innocent, and punishment for the persons responsible for leveling the false accusation.