



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on September 2, 2012

Religious, Human Rights Leaders Speak out for Jailed Pakistani Christian Girl

Religious and human rights leaders from around the world have stepped forward to defend a Pakistani Christian girl who has been arrested and jailed for the supposed crime of blasphemy. Rimsha Masih, who is believed to be around 11 years old and who reportedly has Down syndrome, was accused in mid-August of burning a booklet containing scripture from the Quran, and for throwing the burned pages into the garbage. According to Mission Network News, the girl, who is from a rural area of Mehrabadi in Islamabad, was taken by a mob that threatened to burn the homes of Christians in the area unless she was arrested by the police.



“Human-rights groups are asking for the girl to be released immediately,” reported the missions news site. “According to [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#), prominent Muslim clerics in Pakistan and the country’s president are pressing for a fair and impartial investigation into her case.” The new site noted that blasphemy laws in the country “have long been used to harass religious minorities and settle personal vendettas. Amnesty International and other human rights groups called for Pakistan to reform their blasphemy laws and protect Masih and her family against possible intimidation or attack.”

The [Christian Post](#) reported that on August 31 a Pakistani court ordered that the girl continue to be held for another two weeks while the police pursue an investigation into the charges. An attorney for the man who accused the girl of blasphemy warned the court that locals may take the law into their own hands if the girl is not convicted.

According to sources close to the situation, the charges against the girl appear to be trumped up, prompting Pakistan’s Human Rights Commission to condemn her arrest and imprisonment. “The fact that the girl is a juvenile and suffers from Down syndrome only makes the charge more preposterous and barbaric,” the commission said in a statement. “It is also extremely disturbing to note that the police allowed a mob to surround the police station and demand that she be handed over.”

Paul Bhatti, Pakistan’s Minister for National Harmony, told the BBC that because the girl was known to have a mental disorder it appeared “unlikely she purposefully desecrated the Quran.... From the reports I have seen, she was found carrying a waste bag which also had pages of the Quran.” Bhatti explained that the situation became more heated as local people were incited and a mob formed to demand the girl’s arrest. “The police were initially reluctant to arrest her, but they came under a lot of pressure from a very large crowd, who were threatening to burn down Christian homes,” he said. He added that more than 600 people had fled the largely Christian neighborhood out of fear of reprisal.

The *Christian Post* noted that Pakistan’s blasphemy law “is frequently misused to target religious



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minorities — Christians, Shi'as, Ahmadiyyas and Hindus — and allows Islamists to justify killings. Extremist Islamists believe that killing a 'blasphemous' person earns a heavenly reward." The report added that a mere accusation "is enough to have a person arrested. There is no provision in the law to punish a false accuser or a false witness of blasphemy. Some local Muslims seek revenge by making an allegation against his or her adversary who is a non-Muslim. Many who are accused of blasphemy are killed by mobs extra-judicially."

The incident has prompted religious leaders, both Christian and Muslim, as well as human rights groups around the world, to demand the girl's release. Xavier P. William of the group Life for All condemned the court's decision to continue holding the girl. "This is just insanity because she is just a child," he said. "We demand that Rimsha's case be transferred to the juvenile justice system. If that is not done, at least the hearings in her case should be conducted within Adiala Jail as we have concerns for her safety."

Among Muslim groups denouncing the girl's arrest was the All Pakistan Ulema Council, an organization of Muslim clerics and scholars, whose chairman, Allama Tahir Ashrafi, told the BBC: "The law of the jungle is taking over now and anybody can be accused of anything." Ashrafi called on Pakistan's government to conduct an impartial investigation and mete out punishment on any false accusers. "We see Rimsha as a test case for Pakistan's Muslims, Pakistan's minorities, and for the government," Ashrafi told a news conference in Islamabad. "We don't want to see injustice done with anyone. We will work to end this climate of fear. The accusers should be proceeded against with full force, so that no one would dare make spurious allegations."

[Baptist Press News](#) noted that Ashrafi's support for the Christian girl is particularly noteworthy because of his connection to the Defense of Pakistan Council, a coalition of Islamic groups, some of them with militant and outlaw ties within the country. "The fact that Muslim mullahs — even radical leaders — were defending Masih was not lost on Sajid Ishaq, chairman of the Pakistan Interfaith League, which includes Christian, Sikh and other religious minorities," reported Baptist Press News, which quoted Ishaq as saying that "this is the first time in the history of Pakistan that the Muslim community and scholars have stood up for non-Muslims. We are together demanding justice, demanding an unbiased investigation."

Among those in the Christian community to sound off about the incident was Faith McDonnell of the Washington, D.C.-based [Institute for Religion and Democracy](#), who said it was "inconceivable that human beings could treat a little girl, let alone one with Down syndrome, in such a brutal manner." She noted that the Muslim mob "was intent on killing Rimsha and other Christians in the community, unless she was turned over to the authorities and put in prison."

[Fox News](#) reported that the World Council of Churches had used the attack against the girl as a pretext to call a conference to discuss Pakistan's blasphemy law. "This is just the latest in a series of similar incidents going back many years," said Mathews George Chunakara, a spokesman for the liberal-leaning religious group. "Some cases are reported, but many go unreported."

Mission Network News noted that Christian leaders in Pakistan's government have been the target of attacks over their opposition to the law. "Last year, Pakistan's Minister of Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti — the only Christian member of the federal Cabinet — was killed by an assassin in Islamabad," the news site reported. "And Salman Taseer, Punjab province's governor, was killed by one of his bodyguards for his opposition to the blasphemy law."



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At approximately five percent, Christians make up the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the country.



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