



ASIA/PAKISTAN - Asia Bibi raped by accusers; death threats from Islamic fundamentalists

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) – Before being handed over to police and put on trial for blasphemy, Asia Bibi was suffered rape at the hands of her accusers. This is what she told the Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, who visited Asia in prison two days ago. Following their conversation, the governor said that the woman “signed an appeal of clemency to President Ali Zardari” and said that she affirms her story, which she will “personally report to the President.” Asia says she is innocent, but groups of Islamic fundamentalists have already threatened to kill her if she goes free.

In the meantime, the hours of great expectation pass as the fate of Asia Bibi remains unknown. Tomorrow, the Minister of Religious Minorities, Shabaz Bhatti will present a report to President Ali Zardari, who in the coming days will decide whether or not to grant the woman freedom. For Asia, that would mean immediate release, without the need for any appeal process. The High Court of Lahore has not yet fixed a date for her first hearing in the appeals court, which many hope will not need to be held in the end.

Yesterday, human rights activists from the “All Pakistan Minorities Alliance” (APMA) took to the streets of Lahore in protest, calling for the release of Asia Bibi and the abolishment of the blasphemy law, which is causing great suffering for religious minorities. The protest was led by Najmi Saleem, a Christian woman and female coordinator of the APMA as well as member of the Provincial Parliament of Punjab, who told Fides: “The minorities in Pakistan live under the constant threat of violence. Asia Bibi has committed no crime and deserves freedom. We will continue our fight for the abolition of the law on blasphemy, although we know that it is very difficult in a country where Islamic fundamentalism is widespread. The soldiers make death threats to myself and to whoever works for its abolition. But, our hope never dies. We are also supported by several NGOs and prominent Muslim figures, as the law also takes its toll on Muslims, as well.”

In response to the APMA demonstration, Islamic religious leaders of the organization Tahafuz Namoos-e-Risalat Mahaz (TNRM) have announced that they “will fiercely resist any government attempt to abolish the law,” and that “every change should be submitted to Islamic leaders for approval.” Muhammad Ali Naqashbandi, Secretary General of the TNRM, criticized Governor Salman Taseer for his support for Asia Bibi's release, announcing a public protest on November 24 in front of the Governor's Palace. His position, the other says, “wounds millions of Muslims” and “will lead them to follow in the footsteps of Ghazi Ilmuddin Shaheed, who killed someone accused of blasphemy.” This anecdote refers to Ghazi Ilmuddin Shaheed, dubbed “Hero of Anti-Blasphemy.” He was a carpenter from Lahore who, in 1929, killed author Shaheed Mahashay Rajpal, who had written a book seen as blasphemous towards the prophet Mohammad.

Commenting on such threats, Najmi Saleem told Fides: “We are hoping for the best for Asia. However, her life will be in danger anyways, as soldiers will try to kill her if she is freed.” She also mentioned the examples of two brothers, Rashid Emmanuel and Sajid Masih Emmanuel, both Christians accused of blasphemy, killed in cold-blood in front of the Court of Faisalabad, during their hearings, in July 2010. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 22/11/2010)