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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Christian sentenced to 25 years prison for blasphemy released

Lahore (Fides Service) - Munir Masih, a Christian accused and sentenced to 25 years in prison for blasphemy, was freed on bail today, 27 November, by the High Court of Lahore.

His is another case of blatant abuse of the blasphemy law: Munir had been sentenced “for touching the Koran with dirty hands”. The man has always protested his innocence, explaining that the unfounded allegations were made by a neighbor after a dispute between their children. Munir, a worker who lives in the district of Kasur in Punjab, is married to Riqqiya Bibi and father of six children. Riqqiya Bibi, also sentenced to 25 years for the same charge, still remains in prison, but lawyers are hoping that, after the release of her husband, she will receive the same same justice. The High Court will rule for her next week.

Both, arrested in December 2008, were sentenced by the Municipal Court to 25 years in prison, but after further investigation and verification, the Lahore High Court (second level) is preparing to overturn the verdict. Bail signifies this, lawyers on the case notified Fides. They are members of the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement, with offices in London and Lahore. The request for bail for the Christian couple was presented three times and the couple had already been released in January 2009 before being arrested again following protests by Muslim militants.

“The case of Munir Masih and Riqqiya Bibi – revealed a Fides source - confirmed the trend that many of the unfair verdicts imposed in the first instance for blasphemy, based on false accusations, are reversed after further investigations by the High Court: this occurs in 95% of cases. Hopefully this allows happens in the case of Asia Bibi. Meanwhile there is the serious problem of the conditions under which the Tribunals make judgments, easily influenced by external pressures, and the urgent revision of legislation on blasphemy.”

In the wake of the case of Asia Bibi, the first Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy, and the mobilizing national and international following, a proposed revision of the blasphemy law was tabled at the National Assembly (see Fides 26/11/2010) by Sherry Rehman, Muslim Parliamentarian and President of the prestigious “Jinnah Institute”. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 27/11/2010)

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