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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Christmas in jail for Asia Bibi: sliding processing time

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) - The Lahore High Court today extended the suspension of sentence for Asia Bibi - the Christian woman sentenced to death for blasphemy - until 23 December, the same day the Court should then announce the date of the first hearing for the appeal process. The Court also ordered the Government of Pakistan "not to amend the blasphemy law before the final ruling in Asia Bibi's case."

This statement is an obvious interference by the judiciary on the prerogative of Parliament and the Government, who hold legislative and executive power: lawyers, politicians, and representatives from civil society have commented on the High Court's order to Fides calling it "unacceptable, just a sign of confusion of conflict of powers. The Court can not in any way affect the role of Parliament or the Government." What is clear, note sources of Fides, is that "the case of Asia Bibi is being politicised, and, on one hand, there are attempts to insert it into political or tactical disputes, and on the other is a gross act of exploitation by radical Islamic groups."

In fact, yesterday in Islamabad, the radical activists of the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) protested before Parliament, asking the Government to deal with the "real problems of the country", citing inflation and "the submissive rapport with the United States", and asking to give up the revision of the blasphemy law.

Meanwhile the work of the Commission appointed by President Zardari to revise the law is about to begin and, as authoritative sources in the Pakistani government reveal to Fides, "the Commission expects to deliver an outcome and a proposal for revision within three months."

Asia Bibi's family has learned sadly about the trial's postponement and is preparing to celebrate Christmas without Asia. "It will be a Christmas in which all the Christians of Pakistan remember and pray for Asia and her family. While the politicians plays their games, there is an innocent victim who suffers in prison and children without a mother," Haroon Barket Masih told Fides, head of the Masihi Foundation," which is taking care of the family and providing legal assistance, noting that "the appeal process is expected to last about a year."

According to official data released today by the press in Pakistan, there are 130 people in prison for blasphemy in different jails in Punjab. Of these, 64 were convicted, while 52 are on trial. Of those convicted, 12 (including Asia Bibi) are sentenced to death while others are serving life imprisonment or other penalties. Only eight of them are Christians, the remaining 122 are Muslims. Of the eight Christians, two are women (Asia Bibi and Riqqiya Bibi, wife of Munir Masih, see Fides 27/11/2010), and six are men. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 06/12/2010)

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