



ASIA/PAKISTAN - New case of blasphemy: Christian woman in jail

Faisalabad (Agenzia Fides) – A Christian woman, Agnes Nuggo, was accused of blasphemy and arrested in the Diocese of Faisalabad, in Punjab province. The local Church, which is handling the case, expressed her “extreme concern” over the affair to Fides.

As reported to Fides, the Commission for Justice and Peace in the diocese, Agnes is about 50 years old, is married to Bashir Masih, has children and lives with his family in the Christian quarter of Waris Pura. She was accused of blasphemy after a dispute over a piece of land that had already created controversy with his relatives. Some Muslim neighbours accused her of having made insulting statements against the Prophet Mohammed and against Islam. On 16 February, the local police registered a FIR (First Information Report) pursuant to art. 295/a of the Criminal Code and arrested her. Agnes professes her innocence and says the accusations are completely fabricated.

Fr Nisar Barkat, Director of the Justice and Peace Commission in Faisalabad, told Fides: “Bishop Joseph Coutts has become aware of the case and asked me to follow it closely.” Fr Nisar was in court and obtained a copy of the complaint against Agnes, who will have her first court hearing in two weeks. The Church will find her a lawyer and will take care of her family.

According to some sisters who know Agnes personally “the case is quite complicated: the woman was lured into a trap. Some people wanted to take revenge on her, because in the past Agnes had agreed to testify in court for money.”

Fr Pascal Paulus, a Dominican priest in the Waris Pura area, told Fides that “the situation is critical for us Christians. We need to be very careful. The Islamic radicals want to exploit these cases to attack the Christian minorities. We are exposed to spurious attacks, which have already been happening.”

Haroon Barkat Masih, from the Masihi Foundation which is looking after Asia Bibi's case told Fides: “She is a new Asia Bibi. Agnes' case is one of many cases of persecution that continue to occur. Most of the episodes don't leave a trace and do not reach the clamour of the spotlight. Only when the victims' families trust in the Churches, foundations and NGOs, then the injustices come to light. Families often keep silent for fear of retaliation. And institutions are absent: in this situation, what can Christians do?”

Rosemary Noel, head of the Pakistan Catholic Women's Organisation tells Fides: “Being a Christian woman in Pakistan is a dual challenge. Even the status of women is itself exposed to discrimination, violence and abuse. Women struggle to gain access to education and the world of work. Those Christians are doubly discriminated against. They are considered as objects by Muslims and suffer all sorts of abuse and injustice to general indifference.”

According to data provided by Fides by the Justice and Peace Commission of the Pakistani Bishops, including Agnes, there have been 16 Christian women accused and imprisoned between 1987 and 2010 (in addition to a Muslim woman and a Hindu), but many other cases escape inclusion, because they do not end with a formal complaint. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 22/2/2011)