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ASIA/PAKISTAN - After Rimsha's case, other 36 cases sentenced either to death or life imprisonment for blasphemy

Islamabad (Agenzia Fides) - If one case, that of Rimsha Masih, was resolved with a happy ending, there are many other cases of alleged blasphemy in which innocent victims suffer in prison and are subject to a long legal ordeal. As reported to Fides by local sources, in Pakistan today 16 people are on the death row, awaiting execution, for blasphemy; other 20 defendants are serving life sentences, many others are awaiting trial or have appealed after a first instance conviction. "In 95% of cases, the allegations are false," says to Fides a Muslim lawyer who requested anonymity. This is why the outcome of Rimsha Masih's case, the Christian minor who yesterday was acquitted by the High Court in Islamabad, brings to the mind the controversial blasphemy law, consisting of two articles of the Criminal Code, the 295b and 295c, which punish with life sentence or death penalty any contempt to the Koran or the Prophet Mohammed.
Speaking to Fides, Naeem Shakir, a Catholic lawyer who defends many victims of blasphemy, notes that "the law is so vague that it can be easily used for settling personal affairs. Abuse of this law scares religious minorities, in particular, forcing them to leave the country because they no longer feel safe. "
According to Wilson Chaudhry, leader of the "British Pakistani Christian Association", "the ruling pro Rimsha will not bring an immediate change. The volatility and instability within the Pakistani society do not allow the repeal of the blasphemy law, which is used as a tool to discriminate against minorities and for persecution. This law – notes Chaudry to Fides - is still strongly supported by the majority of Muslims and needs to be reformed gradually. Victims like Asia Bibi and Younis Masih are still in prison on false charges of blasphemy, and show the many failures of the judicial system in Pakistan."
In a statement sent to Fides, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), praised the court's decision on Rimsha as "positive result to address the culture of impunity and intolerance that plagues Pakistan and emphasize the importance of the State of law. " It also stresses that the blasphemy law is used to "abuse religious freedom or to carry out private vendettas." For this reason Rimsha's case "indicates the need to reform or repeal the blasphemy law, which feeds religious extremism and threatens freedom of religion and human rights for all in Pakistan."
In a note sent to Fides the NGO "Christian Solidarity Worldwide" (CSW) recalls the shadows still present: "A judgment of the Court does not guarantee Rimsha's and her family's personal safety," also "this decision can still be put in discussion "with an appeal to the Supreme Court. It remains to be seen whether the man accused of framming Rimsha, Imam Khalid Chishti Jadoon, will be held responsible. "If he is - says CSW – it will be a sign of the progress made by Pakistan." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 21/11/2012)

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