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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Asia Bibi's trial begins

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) - On Monday, March 17, the hearing before the High Court of Lahore - second instance –regarding Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Christian woman and mother of 5 children, reopens. She was arrested on June 19 2009, and sentenced to death on November 11, 2010 by a court of first instance under Pakistan's "blasphemy law" because accused of slandering Islam. The woman is now in the women's prison in Multan (Punjab), and as Asia Bibi's defense team reported to Fides, she will not be present at the hearing for security reasons. A hearing on the case was scheduled in February, but was postponed. Today, Asia's defense team is led by the Christian lawyer Naeem Shakir, a well-known personality in the field of human rights, awarded the "Human Rights Defender Award" by the Pakistani government in 2012. The lawyer, after examining the documents, evidence and the ruling of first instance, reported to Fides that he "is confident on the outcome of the trial and on the release of the woman", given that "her innocence is incontrovertible". There are also Muslim lawyers in the team: the defense, in fact, does not want the case to be exploited in a "conflict of religion", but is considered only on a legal level.
And if the Islamists were to take to the streets and protest? "The case is defended in court and we want it to have a strictly legal value: Asia is innocent", explained the defense team to Fides. "If there is pressure on the judges, and if the case is handled with care and diligence, Asia will be released". According to possible predictions, 3-4 hearings will be necessary before the High Court, and a ruling may be delivered within six months.
Contacted by Fides, Asia Bibi's husband, Ashiq Masih says: "For years, we have been waiting for Asia to be released. Our children and I miss her very much". Masih and lawyers visited Asia in Multan a week ago: "She had fever but she is better now. She prays and hopes, and asks everyone to pray for her. Asia, who is innocent, has suffered in prison for many years. Today we pray for an acquittal". The legal costs are now incurred by the "Renaissance Education Foundation" (REF) in Lahore and by some NGOs. In the meantime the Christian communities in Lahore, invite all to pray "so that the judges have the strength and wisdom to make the right decision".
Asia Bibi's case represented a shock in the country: in 2010, the then Minister of Catholic minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti and Governor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, a Muslim, were killed by extremists because they supported changes to the controversial "blasphemy law". As in Asia's case, the law is often misused for personal disputes and used against religious minorities. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 15/03/2014)

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