



ASIA/PAKISTAN - New hearing for Asia Bibi on May 27

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) - The first hearing of the appeal process for Asia Bibi, a Catholic woman sentenced to death in Pakistan on charges of blasphemy has been scheduled for May 27. As reported to Fides from the pool of defense attorneys, the case will be discussed in front of a panel of judges of the Lahore High Court, led by Judge Anwar-Ul- Haq.

While Asia has been languishing in the women's prison in Multan for over 4 years and a half, since February 2014 to today the judiciary of Lahore, under pressure from radical Islamic groups, has postponed the hearings four times because the judges themselves, fearing reprisals, tend to avoid the responsibility of deciding on such a delicate case.

"In Asia Bibi's case, any delay or postponement means denying justice", says a note sent to Fides by the lawyer Mushtaq Gill, head of the NGO LEAD ("Legal Evangelical Association Development"), committed to the defense of Christian Pakistanis. "Too often – says Gill – Christians are considered as 'second class citizens', justice is denied, especially when they are accused of blasphemy". Christians branded as "blasphemous", even if most of the time on the basis of false accusations, risk their lives and also the lives of those who dare to defend them is at risk. There are cases where Islamic leaders have issued a "fatwa" (religious decree) publicly inviting the faithful to kill the alleged "blasphemer", with extra-judicial executions, trampling the rule of law. For example in January 2011 Mumtaz Qadri, the man who shot and killed the Governor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, guilty of having defended Asia Bibi, is now hailed as a "hero" and a mosque on the outskirts of Islamabad, was named after him. For this reason, Christians who are often accused, if released, are forced to leave the country in order to save their life. And even their lawyers are victims of intimidation and threats. Lawyer Gill concludes: "The battle against extremists in Pakistan cannot be won until the government puts in place the necessary legislative reforms: what needs to be done to get to the root of the problem is to first of all repeal the blasphemy laws without fearing the reaction of extremists". (PA) (Agenzia Fides 03/05/2014)