

Faith groups in Pakistan seek release of girl accused of blasphemy

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August 28 (ENInews)--A bail hearing is set for 28 August in Islamabad in the case of a girl charged with blasphemy for allegedly burning pages of the Quran, Islam's holy scriptures.

Several secular groups in Pakistan have joined street protests by Christian activists demanding the release of Rimsha Masih, whose family is Christian and who lives near the nation's capital. On 28 August, news reports said that an examination has shown that she is between 13 and 14 and that her mental development does not match her age. Her father has said she has learning difficulties and she is reportedly illiterate.

"This teenager is innocent. How can an illiterate girl commit blasphemy by burning a sacred text that she cannot recognize?" Salamat Akhtar, chairman of the All Pakistan Christian League, told ENInews 27 August from his base at Rawalpindi. The league organized street protests in Karachi, Hyderabad and Singh.

Several action groups like Citizens Forum for Democracy, Action Committee for Human Rights and the Peace and Development Organization joined the protests.

According to news reports, the girl was arrested on 17 August after allegations she had burned pages of the Quran while burning papers from the trash in a cooking fire. A Muslim mob threatened to burn her and her house.

Paul Bhatti, Pakistan's minister for National Harmony, has been quoted by the BBC saying that it seemed "unlikely she purposefully desecrated the Quran."

Akhtar said that several hundred Christians have fled their houses near Islamabad fearing attacks after mosques repeatedly played out on loudspeaker the blasphemy allegation against the Christian girl.

Pakistan is 95 percent Muslim. The blasphemy law, which makes desecration of the Quran punishable by death, has been reportedly misused in property disputes and

personal rivalries.

Sending a girl to prison "is against the very spirit of Islam which is all about being just and compassionate. The state should care for its children, not torment them," said Imran Khan, chief of the Justice Party.

Meanwhile, the Vatican has joined the protest. Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, head of the Vatican congregation for interfaith dialogue, on 25 August stressed the girl "cannot read or write."