

Pakistani minister denies release of Christian blasphemy accused

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November 22, 2010

Thrissur, India, November 22 (ENInews)--There is confusion about the fate of a Christian woman sentenced to death under Pakistan's draconian blasphemy law after a minister in the country's government denied reports that President Asif Ali Zardari has ordered her release.

"This is not true," Shahbaz Bhatti, the federal minister for minorities, told ENInews on 22 November from his office in Islamabad regarding the release of Asia Bibi, who was sentenced to death on 9 November for blasphemy.

The verdict had led to widespread international criticism ranging from human rights groups to the churches, with Pope Benedict XVI calling for her release.

The government minister had been contacted to confirm news reports that President Zardari had ordered the release of the 45-year old Christian mother of five who had been in custody since June 2009 on the blasphemy charges.

Several news sources including the Kuwait News Agency, KUNA, quoted Pakistani government sources and reported that the Pakistani president had accepted the clemency plea of Bibi and she had been released.

While minorities minister Bhatti, who is a Christian, said the reports are not true, he noted, "We are making all the efforts to get her released and to present a report after studying the case to the president by Wednesday [24 November]."

He said that family members of the Christian woman had met him on 21 November.

"This is a clear case of a false allegation [of blasphemy] against the Christian woman," Bhatti stated.

Peter Jacob, the executive secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Roman Catholic Church in Pakistan, told ENInews that the blasphemy charge against Bibi was "yet another instance of a Christian being charged with dreadful blasphemy case to settle even petty quarrels".

Bibi, said Jacob, had a quarrel with her Muslim neighbour on the flow of drain water from their houses at Itanwalli village in Mankana Sahib district in Punjab province.

The quarrel continued in the fruit field where they worked together and the Muslim women had abused Bibi for using the common glass provided to the workers to drink water.

"The blasphemy charge was brought against her for standing up to the taunts," Jacob stated.

The Catholic commission has long stated that the blasphemy law that provides a mandatory death sentence or life imprisonment even for unintentional blasphemy offences is often misused against Christians and others to deal with property and personal disputes.

The commission has said that although more than 1035 people have been charged under the blasphemy law since 1987, not a single accused has been found guilty by higher courts on appeal.

However, the commission stated, at least 35 people, Christians and Muslims, charged with blasphemy have been killed during court proceedings.

Christians account for about two percent of Pakistan's 184 million people, of whom more than 95 percent are Muslim.