

Pakistani girl accused of blasphemy is granted bail

News

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September 7 (ENInews)--A Christian girl in Pakistan who has been in custody for two weeks on charges of defaming Islam was granted bail on 7 September by a judge in Islamabad. The case has focused international attention on the Muslim-majority country's laws against blasphemy.

Justice Muhammad Azam Khan set bail at one million rupees (US\$10,500) for the release of Rimsha Masih, with an AP report saying that the amount would be paid by a Pakistani group that represents minorities.

Masih's age and intellectual capacity have also been an issue in the case. She has been variously reported as being between 11 and 16 years old and as having Down's Syndrome or other mental challenges.

Human rights advocates are saying the charges should be dropped since Masih is a minor. "The police should come forward and say there is no case, and that there will be no trial," said Asma Jahangir, a prominent human rights lawyer, as quoted in the New York Times.

The international organization Human Rights Watch also said charges should be dropped. "The fact is that this child should not have been behind bars at all," it said in a statement.

Initially Masih, who lives near Islamabad, was accused of burning pages of the Quran among some trash papers. Last week, however, a local cleric, Muhammad Khalid Chishti, was arrested on charges he planted the papers in her bag and Masih's lawyers cited a plan to evict up to 400 Christian families from the neighborhood.

Masih's lawyers and members and supporters of religious minorities in Pakistan say the laws that make it a crime - possibly punishable by death - to criticize Islam, the Prophet Muhammad or the Quran holy book are misused in property and business disputes.