

Meriam Ibrahim, freed from Sudan, meets with Pope Francis

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July 24, 2014

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Francis met Meriam Ibrahim, the Christian woman spared a death sentence for apostasy in Sudan, at the Vatican on Thursday (July 24) after she was flown to Rome by the Italian government following a vigorous international campaign to free her.

Ibrahim, 27, was accompanied by her husband Daniel Wani and two young children when she met Francis for nearly half an hour at his Santa Marta residence.

The audience was arranged only hours after she disembarked at Rome's Ciampino Airport with her family on an official Italian aircraft. She was smiling as she carried baby Maya, who was born just two months ago as Ibrahim was shackled in prison.

The pope thanked her for her courage and loyalty to her Christian faith despite facing threats of execution in an ordeal that lasted nearly a year.

The Vatican's chief spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said Francis wanted Thursday's meeting to be a "gesture of support for all those who suffer for their faith, or living in situations of difficulty or restraint."

Lapo Pistelli, Italy's deputy foreign minister, flew to Khartoum to collect Ibrahim and accompany the family on the flight to Italy.

He said her Sudanese passport was only returned by authorities late Wednesday and she was told she could leave the country with her husband, who has U.S. citizenship. The family is expected to leave Italy for the U.S. within days.

On Wednesday, Ibrahim's case was the subject of a congressional hearing in Washington as lawmakers sought to highlight her plight and Sudan's poor record on religious freedom.

Ibrahim had been trapped in Sudan since her release from prison where she was awaiting execution for refusing to renounce Christianity. Though she has been a Christian her entire life, Sudan considers her a Muslim because her father is Muslim.

She gave birth in chains in a Khartoum jail cell in May after her father claimed she had abandoned Islam and committed adultery with her Christian husband as mixed-faith marriages are considered illegal.

The country's Supreme Court threw out the death sentence in June.