



11.18.2010

## PAKISTAN CSW says death sentence for Asia Bibi highlights weaknesses in justice system

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Following an international outcry against the death sentence given to Asia Bibi, a defendant convicted of blasphemy in Pakistan last week, CSW is urging the government of Pakistan to address the “deeply-rooted problems” highlighted by this case, including “the continued abuse of the blasphemy laws and the underlying weaknesses in Pakistan’s justice system”.

Asia Bibi was sentenced to death by the session court in Sheikhpura for blasphemy against the Prophet Mohammed, a form of blasphemy that carries a mandatory death penalty in Pakistan. According to the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA), she has been in prison since the case was registered in June 2009. Her family maintains that the charge is false and intends to lodge an appeal. Two levels of appeal remain available but Asia Bibi is likely to remain in prison unless bail can be secured.

Spurious blasphemy accusations are increasingly common and relatively simple to register in Pakistan. At the trial stage, lower court judges are susceptible to manipulation and intimidation from local groups, meaning that even victims of patently false accusations can be forced to appeal and wait years for a High Court or Supreme Court acquittal. Nobody sentenced to death has yet been executed, but many await a decision in prison, such as Waji ul-Hassan, a Christian who has been on death row since 2002. In prison, blasphemy prisoners are at risk of violent abuse because of the stigma of the charge.

CSW-UK’s Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, “Asia Bibi should never have been charged with blasphemy in the first place and her sentence is a tragic reminder of the continued abuse of the blasphemy laws and the underlying weaknesses in Pakistan’s justice system. Deeply-rooted problems of prejudice, inefficiency, corruption, and under-resourcing are amplified in blasphemy cases, and even more so for religious minorities. As a prisoner, Asia Bibi’s experience behind bars is made worse by the fact that she is a Christian, a woman and a blasphemy defendant – each of which increases the likelihood of abusive treatment. Injustices of this kind will continue to occur until such time as the blasphemy laws are repealed and practical measures are taken to render the rule of law meaningful in Pakistan.”

### **Notes to Editors:**

1. There has been a *de facto* moratorium on the death penalty for the past two years in Pakistan.