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PAKISTAN CSW supports recommendation to repeal blasphemy laws

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) supports the personal recommendation of Pakistan's Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, for the repeal of the widely-misused blasphemy laws.

The recommendation came as part of Minister Bhatti's investigation into the case of Asia Bibi, thought to be the first woman sentenced to death under the blasphemy laws, and was submitted to President Asif Ali Zardari on November 25. The report concluded that the blasphemy case registered against Asia Bibi, a Christian, is without foundation.

According to the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA), Minister Bhatti's report proposed that Asia Bibi be released from prison or pardoned if her pending appeal in the Lahore High Court is not addressed within an appropriate timeframe. President Zardari has reportedly agreed to pardon Asia Bibi if her appeal "languishes" in the courts, and Minister Bhatti has assured CSW that the government is making efforts to guarantee the safety of Asia Bibi and her family.

The President has also called for the formation of a high level committee, headed by Shahbaz Bhatti, which will consult with Islamic scholars, political parties and human rights organizations to review the blasphemy laws and propose recommendations to prevent their misuse.

Minister Bhatti has regularly spoken out against the blasphemy laws, and the Ministry for Minorities Affairs has long been leading negotiations with other state officials to agree possible amendments to the legislation. "Tabling a proposal for amendment is not the difficult part, it is gathering enough support that requires most effort," Minister Bhatti told CSW on Monday.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "This is Minister Bhatti's first opportunity to express his personal opinion on the blasphemy laws and CSW welcomes his bold call for full repeal. Furthermore, the significance of President Zardari's decision to establish a committee on the issue should not be underestimated, and we urge its members not to limit discussions to amendment alone. Regarding Asia Bibi's case, in light of current circumstances, we hope that due process can be quickly and justly followed by way of a high court appeal so that her innocence can be proven to all."

Notes to Editors:

1. 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 maintain that the charge is false and intend to lodge an appeal. Two levels of appeal remain available.
2. Nobody sentenced to death for blasphemy has yet been executed, but many await a decision in prison, including Waji ul-Hassan, a Christian who has been on death row since 2002. There has been a *de facto* moratorium on the death penalty for the past two years in Pakistan.

3. AFP news agency reports that on Monday a petition was made at Lahore High Court to prevent President Zardari from pardoning Asia Bibi while her case is still in the courts. The hearing has been adjourned until 6 December.