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PAKISTAN Blasphemy prisoner found dead in prison cell before appeal could be heard

Qamar David, a Christian awaiting appeal against a blasphemy conviction in 2010, has been found dead today in his prison cell in Karachi, Pakistan. Although prison authorities say that he died of a heart attack, church leaders and human rights activists have expressed skepticism about this claim and demanded that the cause of death be ascertained independently.

Qamar David had been in jail since 2006, following an accusation of blasphemy against the Prophet Mohammed. A sessions court in Karachi sentenced him to life imprisonment in February 2010, four years after the original accusation, and his lawyer has been seeking an appeal hearing since that time. The appeal process can take years in Pakistan.

Qamar David's lawyer has always maintained that the allegations were spurious, triggered by a business rivalry, and that the conviction was the result of pressure from local religious clerics and their supporters. Both he and his client have experienced threats or violence from mobs at nearly every court hearing in this case.

Andrew Johnston, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) Advocacy Director, said, "We are shocked to hear this sad news and our thoughts and prayers are with Qamar David's wife and children. The last five years of this family's life have been utterly ravaged by the consequences of a vindictive blasphemy accusation that would have very likely been dismissed by the High Court in time. It is yet another tragic example of lives needlessly destroyed by the blasphemy laws in Pakistan and the inability of the government, court system and prisons to prevent this. Given the threats known to be faced by blasphemy prisoners, it is imperative that the true cause of his death be investigated properly and independently.

"This news comes less than two weeks days after the assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti, and it underlines the urgent need to continue his work. The government must address both the ease with which the blasphemy laws can be abused, and the social attitudes which view it as acceptable to do so."