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PAKISTAN Another Christian accused of blasphemy dies in jail

Courtesy of International Christian Concern (www.persecution.org)

International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that on September 9, a Christian man accused of blasphemy died in prison of a treatable disease after officials denied him proper medical treatment.

The post-mortem report indicated that Aslam Masih died due to Dengue virus. A local Christian human rights organization asked prison officials to provide Masih with proper treatment, but the officials cited security concerns to deny Masih such treatment.

Masih was arrested by the police in the beginning of 2010 after two members of the Tablighi Jamat (an Islamic missionary group) falsely accused him of blasphemy. The police initially released Masih due to lack of evidence, but later re-arrested him after facing pressure from radical Muslims.

In the past, Christians accused of blasphemy have been killed in jail or while still in court. On March 15, Pakistani officials reported that Qamar David had died of a heart attack. However, his lawyer maintained that David was murdered due to the blasphemy accusation. On September 20, 2009, Falish Masih was also found dead inside his prison cell. Though he had severe wounds all over his body, the Pakistani police claimed that Falish committed suicide. On July 19, 2010, Muslim extremists shot and killed Rashid and Sajjid Emmanuel, two brothers accused of blasphemy, outside a court house in Faisalabad.

"I condemn the prison authorities for not providing medical treatment to Aslam Masih and urge Punjab government to constitute (an) inquiry committee to investigate (the) death of Aslam Masih. The death of Aslam Masih in jail has raised questions of safety and security for the life of Asia Bibi, a Christian mother sentenced to death and in jail waiting for her appeal to be heard in Lahore High Court," said Dr. Nazir Bhatti in a statement to ICC. Dr. Bhatti is the president of the Pakistan Christian Congress.

ICC's Regional Manager for South Asia, Jonathan Racho, said, *"Aslam Masih is the latest victim of the brutal blasphemy law in Pakistan. Once again, Pakistan has shown its complete contempt for the lives of its religious minorities. We urge the international community to pressure Pakistan protect the rights of Christians and other vulnerable groups in the country."*