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PAKISTAN | Muslim clerics demand fair treatment for Rimsha Masih ahead of tomorrow's hearing

Allama Tahir Ashrafi, chairman of the All Pakistan Ulema Council (APUC), Pakistan's leading coalition of Islamic clerics, made an unprecedented statement yesterday calling for the government to prevent the misuse of the country's blasphemy laws, and to ensure that the case of Rimsha Masih, a young Christian girl accused of blasphemy, be handled fairly and impartially.

Ashrafi told Associated France Press (AFP) that Rimsha's case should be a "watershed" for Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

"We demand an impartial and thorough investigation into the case. Strict action should be taken against all those accusing the girl if she is found innocent," he said.

"The government should make this case an example so that nobody will dare misuse the blasphemy law in future."

Ashrafi also urged the government to offer protection to Christians from Rimsha's neighborhood, who have fled the area for fear of reprisal attacks as a result of the blasphemy allegation. Hundreds of Christians have reportedly sought refuge in a nearby forest and are too afraid to return to their homes.

Dr Paul Bhatti, Special Advisor to the Prime Minister on National Harmony, who worked with prominent Muslims clerics to avert mob violence after Rimsha's arrest, told Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), "It is very significant that the Ulema Council has cooperated on this case." He stressed that many in the Muslim community are concerned about Rimsha's situation.

Rimsha Masih was arrested earlier this month on charges of blasphemy for allegedly burning pages with text from the Qur'an. Following conflicting reports about her age and mental condition, doctors who examined Rimsha this week have determined that she is around 14 years old and mentally impaired. The All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA) reports that her case was subsequently transferred to the juvenile court, to be heard tomorrow, 30 August.

Rimsha's lawyer Tahir Naveed Chaudhry, a member of APMA and a Member of the Punjab Assembly (MPA), has emphasized that Rimsha is distressed and confused, wanting only to return home. After the APUC statement, he is hopeful that her case will be dismissed tomorrow.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The significance of the APUC's statement this week cannot be overemphasized. It is a real first in the context of the blasphemy laws – a call for justice regardless of the victim's religious identity. What matters most now is getting Rimsha safely back to her family and we are optimistic that this public support from Islamic groups will contribute to this. We call for the swift and fair dismissal of her case tomorrow, and for safeguards to be put in place to protect her family and community from further repercussions."