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PAKISTAN Rimsha Masih hearing delayed after medical report challenged

The bail hearing for Rimsha Masih, the young Christian girl accused of blasphemy in Pakistan, has been delayed until September 1 after her accuser challenged a medical report that determined that she was a juvenile and mentally impaired.

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 earlier this week determined that she is around 14 years old and mentally impaired. Her case was subsequently transferred to the juvenile court; however her accuser disputes the findings.

Yesterday meanwhile, at a meeting of the Special Group set up to monitor Rimsha's case, which was formed at a joint consultative session of the Pakistan Interfaith League (PIL) and All-Pakistan Ulema Council (APUC), Pakistan's leading coalition of Islamic clerics, the PIL chairman Sajid Ishaq urged its members to avoid bias and observe the case with a level head and cool mind.

Ishaq also called for immediate steps to be taken to assist the large numbers of Christians from Rimsha's neighborhood, who have fled the area for fear of reprisal attacks in the aftermath of the blasphemy allegation. CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "This delay is extremely frustrating and prolongs Rimsha's ordeal and separation from her family. The validity of the blasphemy accusation rests on these questions of age and mental condition, but reports of those who have met Rimsha leave little doubt of her confusion over the whole affair. The cruel decision to draw out even the bail hearing in this way is a reflection of the mindsets of those supporting the accusation. We welcome the ongoing intervention of the APUC and PIL and hope that the judge in Rimsha's case will be free to consider the question of bail and the validity of the whole accusation, without undue pressure or intimidation."