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PAKISTAN | Repeated adjournments delay Rimsha Masih hearing while alleged case instigator is charged with blasphemy

The high profile blasphemy case of Pakistani teenager Rimsha Masih was adjourned yesterday for the third time in a row, one day after the alleged instigator of her arrest was himself charged with blasphemy.

Yesterday's adjournment was requested by the claimant's lawyer because of a one day strike by the Punjab Bar Association, while the previous postponement was caused by his queries over legal documentation. The case will now be heard this Friday, September 7.

Rimsha Masih, who has Down's Syndrome and is deemed to be fourteen years old, has been in prison for two and a half weeks, charged with desecrating the Qur'an under section 295B of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC).

In a new development over the weekend, a witness testified that the leader of his mosque, Khalid Jadoon Chishti, had falsified evidence to implicate Rimsha. He claimed that Chishti had added pages of the Qur'an to the bag of burnt rubbish used as evidence against her, to strengthen the basis for the blasphemy accusation, and that he had instigated both the complainant's charge and the mob aggression that followed.

On September 2, Chishti was himself charged with blasphemy under 295B PPC, and is currently in police custody. It is further alleged that he and others from Rimsha's neighborhood on the outskirts of Islamabad have been promoting anti-Christian sentiment in recent months.

The All Pakistan Ulema Council (APUC) and the Pakistan Interfaith League continue to express support for Rimsha, including an offer of protection and condemnation of Chishti's actions. They are calling for misuse of the blasphemy laws to be prevented, but are explicit in not seeking their amendment or repeal, which remains a highly volatile debate in Pakistan.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's (CSW's) Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "If proven to be true, the conduct of Khalid Chishti represents a pattern now all too familiar in the context of Pakistan's blasphemy laws, illustrating the ease with which this legislation is manipulated, the pre-meditated targeting of non-Muslims, and the inability of the Pakistani legal system to halt such misuse at the earliest stage. However, with the continued support of the APUC, the Pakistani authorities have a rare opportunity to strengthen the rule of law by demonstrating that this kind of behavior will no longer be tolerated. It is of the utmost importance that justice is seen to be done, fairly and impartially, in both Rimsha and Chishti's cases. We urge the court to avoid further delay in Rimsha's hearing, given her age and vulnerability."