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PAKISTAN CSW reiterates call for government crackdown on vigilantism as Taseer's killer is convicted

While welcoming the conviction of Salmaan Taseer's killer, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is calling on the Government of Pakistan to take further action to tackle vigilantism in the country, including the pursuit of the late Shahbaz Bhatti's killers.

Qadri was convicted and sentenced to death by Judge Syed Pervaiz Ali Shah, at a hearing of the anti-terrorism court on Saturday, for the assassination of Punjab Governor, Salmaan Taseer earlier this year. He has never denied the killing, claiming that Taseer's support for Asia Bibi, a Christian blasphemy defendant, and his criticism of Pakistan's blasphemy laws amounted to blasphemy and therefore justified the act. His lawyers intend to appeal the decision.

There is currently an ad hoc moratorium on the death penalty in Pakistan and no one has been executed by the government since 2008.

In the wake of Taseer's killing, on March 4, Qadri received vocal support from extremist groups and religio-political parties, and his supporters have now reacted violently to news of his conviction. Protests and vandalism have taken place in Lahore, Rawalpindi and Karachi and a call has been made for Justice Shah to be killed. The judge is said to have gone on indefinite leave.

Blasphemy hearings in Pakistan are frequently attended by vocal mobs who openly threaten the defendant, defense lawyer and judge alike. Fear for personal security is a significant factor in the reluctance of judges to acquit defendants in the first instance and in the postponement of appeal hearings. At least one judge has been killed for acquitting blasphemy defendants in the recent past.

CSW's Advocacy Director, Andrew Johnston, said, "While we do not support a death sentence under any circumstances, we recognize that Justice Shah has made a bold stand by convicting Qadri, given the high-profile and controversial nature of this case. No individual has the right to take the law into their own hands and yet Qadri felt justified in doing so and his supporters are doing likewise in calling for the judge to be killed. It is essential that the state be seen to punish those found guilty of hate speech and acts of vigilante violence and that any such action be accompanied by adequate protection for members of the establishment who support this stand. The current climate of impunity will not be addressed unless judges, lawyers, police and government officials can carry out their duties without fear of reprisal. With this in mind, we continue to urge the Pakistani authorities to bring to justice the killers of Shahbaz Bhatti without delay."

Notes to Editors:

1. For further background, see CSW's briefing, ['Pakistan: Religious freedom in the shadow of extremism'](#) (June 2011).