

**Catholic Mission Media Release**  
**Human Rights Day- December 10**

**Catholic Mission's Pakistan Director calls for anti-blasphemy laws to be repealed.**

Speaking on International Human Rights Day, December 10, Catholic Mission's Pakistan Director, Father Mario Rodrigues said the abuse of the anti-blasphemy statutes in Pakistan continues to threaten the life and liberty of Christians, as well as Muslims.

The laws were highlighted in recent months as the world watched the fate of mother of five, Asia Bibi, an agricultural worker sentenced to death for language she used to defend her Christian beliefs. Last week Asia Bibi received a presidential pardon but the notoriety of her case means she may seek political asylum to escape further revenge attacks on herself and her family.



Pakistan's anti-blasphemy laws (articles 295b and 295c) were promulgated in 1984 by General Zia-ul-Haq. Since 1990 offences to the Koran or the Prophet's reputation have been punishable by death. Over 700 people have been indicted on charges of blasphemy since the laws were introduced. As no evidence is required accusers can use the laws with impunity on alleged blasphemers, turning what might have been a petty dispute into the malicious prosecution of an innocent person. Heard before a municipal court a guilty verdict can carry life imprisonment or a death sentence.

This was the case for a Lahore couple Munir Masih and Riqqiya Bibi sentenced to 25 years "for touching the Koran with dirty hands". The Christian couple has always maintained their innocence, saying the charges arose after a dispute between theirs and a neighbour's children.

Pakistan's High Court overturns more than 95 per cent of the municipal judgements. But the acquitted are often marked out as targets by religious extremists with violence and murder common reprisals.

This was the fate of Latif Masih, 22, who was granted bail after five months imprisonment for allegedly burning pages of the Koran. On the day of his release, 18 November, he was shot dead by an assassin.

“The Blasphemy law is contradictory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of which Pakistan is a signatory,” said Fr Mario Rodrigues. “Laws are framed to protect citizens, not to persecute them.”

“Not all Muslims are enemies of Christians. In fact, they have a very cordial relationship in Pakistan,” said Fr Mario, “But the Blasphemy law is used against Christian and Muslim alike to make a false accusation against an individual that has grave consequences.”

“When used against Christians whole villages are burnt and churches desecrated in mob reprisals. It is important for the civil society of Pakistan and the tolerance for minority faiths that this statute is repealed. ”

Catholic Mission’s National Director, Mr Martin Teulan said repealing the blasphemy law reinforces the ideals on which Pakistan and the UN Human Rights Charter were founded:

“The presumption of innocence before the law, the freedom of thought, conscience, opinion and expression, and the protection of minorities,” said Mr Teulan.

“On Human Rights Day we pray that all advocates of justice and their families are filled with the grace and protection of the Holy Spirit in the often dangerous work they undertake protecting the victims of human rights violations.”

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