

Pakistan: Christian on blasphemy charges must be freed – experts

GENEVA (21 October 2021)–UN human rights experts* today urgently appealed to Pakistan to release Stephen Masih, a Pakistani Christian from Sialkot District, who has been detained for over two years awaiting trial for allegedly committing blasphemy.

“We are seriously concerned by the persecution and ongoing detention of Mr. Masih on blasphemy grounds, and by his treatment at the hands of the judicial and prison authorities who are aware of his psychosocial disability and health condition,” the experts said.

“We call on the authorities to urgently review Mr. Masih’s case, and to release and drop all charges against him, and to ensure protection for him and his family.”

The UN experts said they were concerned by the continued persecution and acts of violence perpetrated by State and non-state actors in Pakistan, fuelled by claims of apostasy and blasphemy, often targeting religious or belief minorities.

In March 2019, following an argument with one of his neighbours in Imran Pura Badian village, Mr. Masih was attacked by a group of people accusing him of committing blasphemy. His family home was also set on fire. Local police filed a First Information Report (FIR) against him and arrested him on 15 March 2019. He was informed about the blasphemy charges only three months later.

“It is deeply alarming that a mere disagreement between neighbours could lead to the judicial harassment of an individual, based on his religious or other beliefs, and by the use of anti-blasphemy laws which may carry the death penalty,” the experts said.

The Session Court in Sialkot denied a bail request on 5 August 2021. According to information received by the UN experts, the prosecution did not disclose publicly any evidence against Mr. Masih, and their witness testimonies were not recorded. Lahore High Court will hear an appeal on his bail application on 22 October.

The UN experts also said they were concerned by the lack of medical care given to Mr. Masih in Sialkot District Jail. Medical reviews to assess his mental health and fitness to stand trial have been repeatedly delayed, they said.

The experts added that Mr. Masih's reported detention in a cell with prisoners of the Muslim faith put him in danger, and was a matter of concern.

"We urge the Government of Pakistan to comply with its international human rights obligations, including with regard to freedom of expression, religion or belief, as well as with regard to the rights of persons who belong to minorities, to repeal all its anti-blasphemy and anti-apostasy legislation and to take measures to combat advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination and violence," the experts said.

The experts have been in contact with the Government of Pakistan on the matter.

(*) *The experts: **Ahmed Shaheed**, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; **Irene Khan**, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; **Fernand de Varennnes**, Special Rapporteur on minority issues; **Tlaleng Mofokeng**, [Special Rapporteur on the right to physical and mental health](#)*