

Dangers and Difficulties Facing Christians in Pakistan

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Introduction

Christians in Pakistan, numbering about 3 million, roughly 1.6% of the population, are a small and weak minority who constantly suffer discrimination and the threat of violent attacks. In recent years, they have become one of the most vulnerable religious communities in the world². *Open Doors*, an organisation which works in 60 countries, supporting Christians who are persecuted and documenting their situations, ranked Pakistan 4th in terms of “*difficult to be a Christian*” and top of the list in terms of “*levels of violence faced*”³. Pakistan’s rising level of extremist militancy is just one of many factors that represent special concern to Christians⁴. They are “*not only “soft targets” for the militancy, but also victims of socioeconomic and political exclusion*”⁵.

Most Christians in Pakistan are so poor that escape to a safe country of refuge is practically unthinkable; they are doomed to live with extreme intolerance and danger. However they do have advocates both inside and outside the country⁶ and these people and groups have occasionally succeeded in obtaining some relief and justice. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Asian Human Rights Commission, and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, all make frequent appeals to the Pakistan Government to reform the situation. However, there is no sign of significant improvement and there is a continuing exodus of Christians – those with some access to funds – in pursuit of asylum⁷. One recent report mentions 11,500 Pakistani Christian refugees “trapped” in Thailand⁸. It is important to pursue clarity in understanding the extent of the serious harm from which these people have fled and which they would face if forced to return.

Background: Christianity in Pakistan⁹

Christianity was first brought to parts of what is now known as Pakistan in 1597 by Jesuit missionaries from Goa, then a Portuguese colony on the west coast of the Indian sub-continent. Numbers of converts remained quite small for almost 200 years. Then British colonisation of India in the later 18th and 19th century opened the way for accelerated planting of churches in many parts of the country. Many of the converts were from a Hindu background, members of the lower castes and lowest economic strata, and they seemed to be motivated, in part, by eagerness to escape from those classifications. Ultimately there were about equal numbers of Protestants and Catholics. Christian colleges, churches, hospitals and

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² Mohshin Habib, April 9, 2013, Muslim Persecution of Christians Escalating in Pakistan, <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3664/christian-persecution-pakistan>

³ <https://www.opendoors.org.au/persecuted-christians/blog/the-world-watch-list/>

⁴ For example, see Shakeeb Asrar, USA TODAY, 20 April 2016, “For Pakistani Christians, persecution goes beyond terror attacks”, www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/04/20/pakistani-christians-persecution-goes-beyond-terror-attacks/82651452/

⁵ Rabia Mehmood, Aljazeera Opinion, “The neverending plight of Christians in Pakistan”, 8 April 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/04/neverending-plight-christians-pakistan-160406095729110.html>. The author is an independent journalist and researcher based in Pakistan with interest in religious persecution, gender and human rights.

⁶ For example, see Madeeha Bakhsh, 14 September 2017, “Asia Bibi nominated for EU’s Sakharov Prize”, <https://www.christiansinpakistan.com/asia-bibi-nominated-for-eus-sakharov-prize/>

⁷ For example, see Nasir Saeed, 8 September 2017, “No Home for Persecuted Pakistani Christians in any state”, <http://www.pakistanchristianpost.com/headlinenewsd.php?hnewsid=3105>

⁸ Madeleine Davies, 15 February 2017, “Home Office guidance on Pakistan has ‘serious flaws’, say MPs” <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2016/26-february/news/world/home-office-guidance-on-pakistan-has-serious-flaws-say-mps>

⁹ Three key source for the information that follows are:

- Rabia Mehmood, “The neverending plight of Christians in Pakistan”, op. cit
- “Who are Pakistan’s Christians?”, BBC, 28 March 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35910331>, and
- “Breathing without living: the plight of Christians in Pakistan”, Altaf Khan, Professor, University of Peshawar, 12 January 2017, <https://theconversation.com/breathing-without-living-the-plight-of-christians-in-pakistan-70892>.

schools were established in cities like Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Peshawar, but also in smaller cities and towns and in many rural areas.

When Pakistan achieved independence in 1947, the organization and activities of the Christian community changed drastically. Christians in Punjab and Sindh had been quite active after 1945 in their support for Muhammad Ali Jinnah's Muslim League. Even before the final phase of the movement, leading Indian Christians like Pothan Joseph had rendered valuable services as journalists and propagandists of the Muslim League. Jinnah had repeatedly promised all citizens of Pakistan complete equality of citizenship, but this promise was not kept by his presidential successors. Pakistan became an Islamic Republic in 1956, making Islam the source of legislation and cornerstone of the national identity, while guaranteeing freedom of religion and equal citizenship to all citizens.

The nation was largely secular in policy and practice until 1971 when East and West separated and the eastern part became the nation of Bangladesh. Pakistan, the western part, maintained the name and proceeded to become an increasingly Islamic state, culturally more and more monolithic, with religious minorities that were marginalised and dwindling. Many Hindus moved to India, but Christians tended to try to hold on, a few converting to Islam and others migrating to the UK and other western countries.

In the 1980s and 1990s relationships between Christians and Muslims in Pakistan began to deteriorate, reportedly due to such factors as the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the rise of military dictator General Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, and the influence of stricter religious teachings coming from the Gulf states as catalysts for the changed attitudes. After the 9/11 attacks in the USA the situation degenerated further, with many Pakistani Muslims seeing the US response to the attacks as a foreign plot to defame their faith. Certainly it is recognised that part of the reason why Christians in Pakistan are so badly persecuted is the widespread misconception that Christianity is a western religion¹⁰.

“Many Pakistanis, not only Muslim extremists, believe that Christians are in collusion with the western powers and that to attack them is to attack the West.”

Persecution and discrimination

Pakistan's Christians live with many forms of persecution and discrimination. According to Open Doors¹¹, an organisation which documents persecution of Christians globally, forced marriages, sexual assault and kidnappings are frequent occurrence, with little redress or remedy. Many Christians have little or no access to education, meaning they struggle to find work. Some have to work as bonded labourers, unable to pay back loans which can last for generations. Most Christians are at the mercy of their employers. They have no way of making legal complaints, or defending their rights. They have no political clout and are now barred from high office. Perhaps most importantly there is widespread societal disapproval, rejection and mistreatment, culminating in frequent exploitation, oppression and targeted violence. Some are spat on in the streets and insulted in other ways, and they have little alternative but to tolerate such treatment without protest. What is clear is that there is a continuing marked increase in attacks and persecution¹².

A particular threat to Pakistan's Christians is the existence and misuse of blasphemy laws – which restrict any insults against the prophet Muhammad and make “blasphemy” a crime punishable by death.

President Zia ul-Haq, President from 1978 to 1988, introduced Sharia as a basis for lawmaking, and this was reinforced by President Nawaz Sharif in 1991. Consequently, coerced conversions to Islam from Christianity have become a major source of concern for Pakistani Christians, and many face threats, harassment and intimidation tactics from extremists¹³.

¹⁰ For example, see Nasir Saeed, 8 September 2017, “No Home for Persecuted Pakistani Christians in any state”, <http://www.pakistanchristianpost.com/headlinenewsd.php?hnewsid=3105>

¹¹ Open Doors, 2017 report: “Pakistan: More Dangerous Than Ever”, https://www.opendoors.org.au/persecuted-christians/world-watch-list/pakistan?gclid=eaiaiqobchmigymg0zwn1givxwoqch1exqeleaayasaegkuzpd_bwe

¹² Asian Human Rights Commission, quoted by Stoyan Zaimov, Christian Post Reporter, 6 July 2016, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/christian-persecution-on-rise-pakistan-believers-fear-torching-homes-muslim-mobs-166090/>

¹³ Examples are provided in a recent article by Nasir Seed, op. cit.; kidnapping, mistreatment of relatives, torture and sexual assault during police investigations, are all mentioned as “incentives” to convert.

A 2016 Asian Human Rights Commission report¹⁴ declares that Christians often face a choice of either converting to Islam or abandoning their homes.

The situation is getting worse with each passing day. The Christians are living in constant fear that their houses may be set on fire by a mob if the police does not provide them with round the clock security.

The AHRC report notes that police are doing little to protect the Christian community from such harassment – even though there have been token official promises of protection and isolated examples of “security” at large city churches on special occasions. See also the report of Mohshin Habib.¹⁵

While conversion from Islam to other faiths is not prohibited by law, cultural and social attitudes and influences strongly deter such conversions. Muslims who change their faith to Christianity are invariably subjected to intense societal pressure, at the very least. A recent report¹⁶ indicates that 62 percent of Pakistanis support the death penalty for anyone who leaves Islam. In spite of that there is a continuing phenomenon of people willing to embrace Christianity and face the consequences, as has happened throughout Christian history.

Targetted attacks

In recent years several major violent and lethal attacks on Christians have been well reported¹⁷. However it is widely acknowledged that many other attacks pass unreported beyond the local context. The Religion of Peace (TROP), “a non-partisan, fact-based site” documents attacks on Christians (civilians and church workers) by religious Muslims – on a global basis, carefully excluding incidents associated with war, combat or insurgency.¹⁸ The victims are innocent Christians who are specifically targetted and abused solely on account of their faith by those who claim their own religion as a motive. The report states clearly that this is not a complete account “since much of the violence goes unreported”. And indeed, as an example, it does not mention several incidents reported by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan for 2016. TROP lists 180 incidents for Pakistan subsequent to the chosen starting date – the famous 11 September 2001 – resulting in 454 recorded deaths and 1264 people injured.

Most of the reported incidents relate to attacks on just one or two people, and of course these are not insignificant. The two most recent items on the TROP list are not untypical:

- 27 August 2017, Vehari, a Christian boy is beaten to death by a group of Muslims.
- 13 August 2017, Lahore, a 38-year-old man is tortured to death in prison after refusing to renounce his Christian faith.

Appendix 1 contains a list of the 25 incidents where there were 10 victims or more.

Eight of the largest and most famous incidents of the past 7 years warrant special mention:

- 27 March 2016, Lahore, a massive suicide blast targets Christian families celebrating Easter in a playground, leaving over 78 dead (half of them children), 362 injured. Responsibility claimed by the Pakistan Taliban.
- 15 March 2015, Lahore, targetted suicide bombings by Jamaat-ul-Ahrar near two churches leave at least 15 dead worshippers, 70 injured.
- 22 September 2013, Peshawar, two Jundullah suicide bombers kill 105 worshippers including many women and children, at a church service at the historic All Saints Church in the old quarter of the city, 150 injured.
- 9 March, 2013, Lahore, 35 injured as a Muslim mob rampages through a Christian neighbourhood, burning more than 100 homes.
- 30 April 2011, Gujranwala, fuelled by rumours of a Quran desecration, a Muslim crowd of hundreds attacks a Christian village, burning homes and assaulting the occupants, injuring 25.
- 15 July 2010, Sukkur, 5 members of a church, including the pastor, shot to death outside the building by “Religion of Peace” advocates; 6 others injured.

¹⁴ Quoted by Stoyan Zaimov, Christian Post Reporter, 6 July 2016, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/christian-persecution-on-rise-pakistan-believers-fear-torching-homes-muslim-mobs-166090/>

¹⁵ Mohshin Habib, April 9, 2013, Muslim Persecution of Christians Escalating in Pakistan, <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3664/christian-persecution-pakistan>

¹⁶ Ryan Hamm in Asia, Persecution updates, Open Doors, 3 August 2017, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/new-pakistani-prime-minister-impact-christians/>

¹⁷ See for example the 2016 report of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan: “State Of Human Rights Pakistan 2016” ,pages 91 to 93, <http://hrqp-web.org/hrqpweb/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/State-of-Human-Rights-in-2016.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.thereligionofpeace.com/attacks/christian-attacks.aspx>

- 25 December 2009, Kalar Kahar, about 60 Christians injured when a Muslim crowd attacks them during Christmas prayers.
- 24 December 2009, Peshawar, 5 killed and 24 injured when a suicide bomber detonates a device near a Christian school.

It is widely understood that few if any of the perpetrators have been brought to justice. This reality is highlighted in a June 2015 article in the prestigious *Foreign Policy Magazine*¹⁹:

*The tragedy in all of this is not simply the scale of human suffering, but the one-sided response of the Pakistani government. In 2013, thousands of enraged Sunni Muslim's rampaged through the Christian neighborhood of Joseph Colony in Lahore, torching over 100 homes after a Christian man was accused of committing "blasphemy" against Islam. **In the two years since, not a single individual from the mob has been convicted.** Meanwhile the Christian accused of blasphemy, Sawan Masih, was arrested and sentenced to death, a penalty that is mandatory by order of the Federal Shariat Court. **This example is consistent with a long-running pattern of prosecuting religious minorities while allowing those who persecute them to escape justice.** [emphasis added]*

The lack of effective deterrence causes deep and ongoing fear among the Christian community.

Blasphemy laws

Pakistan's Christian community has developed a growing sense of concern over many issues, but particularly over the strict blasphemy laws. Non-Muslims cannot express themselves without risking accusation of being un-Islamic. These laws are widely viewed as instruments for targetting religious minorities and there is frequent criticism of their alleged abuse for this purpose. Very significantly, there is no provision in Pakistan's blasphemy law to punish a false accuser or a false witness.²⁰ In the 1990s, some Christians were arrested on charges of blasphemy, and for participating in protests that appeared to insult Islam. Since then many people accused of blasphemy have been killed in prison or shot dead in court. Even if pardoned, anyone who has been charged with blasphemy is likely to remain in danger from imams and others in their local village or community. On 6 May 1998 John Joseph, the Catholic bishop of Faisalabad, committed suicide to protest the execution of a Christian man on blasphemy charges. While the famous 2002 Supreme Court acquittal of Ayub Masih, who had been sentenced to death for blasphemy, was seen to set an important precedent, the issue has not gone away.

According to figures from a research centre and independent records kept by Reuters, there have been at least 67 murders over unproven allegations of blasphemy since 1990²¹. The victims of the blasphemy laws are not all Christians; Hindus, Shia Muslims and other minorities are also targetted. The latest twist is charges of blasphemy for allegations of offensive comments on Facebook and other social media services²².

An example of the danger faced by innocent people was provided by the well-known case of Shahid Masih, a Christian then aged 18, who was imprisoned in September 2006 accused of blasphemy, but then released after a year, when he was declared innocent by an "Appeals Court", having never been offered a primary trial.²³ A senior priest involved with the case, Fr. Aftab James, stated that "*almost all blasphemy cases are false and fabricated*". Lawyer Khalil Tahir who carried the case was strong in his condemnation:

Although Masih has been proved innocent, those responsible for his and his family's mental torture and above all for the death of his poor mother, roam large. This authorises other people to do the same.

¹⁹ Isaac Six, Farahnaz Ispahani, 10 June 2015, "Persecution Without Prosecution: The Fate of Minorities in Pakistan", <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/10/persecution-without-prosecution-the-fate-of-minorities-in-pakistan/>

²⁰ Mohshin Habib, April 9, 2013, Muslim Persecution of Christians Escalating in Pakistan, <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3664/christian-persecution-pakistan>

²¹ Reuters, 16 September 2017 "Pakistan man sentenced to death for ridiculing Prophet Muhammad on WhatsApp" <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/16/pakistan-man-sentenced-to-death-for-ridiculing-prophet-muhammad-on-whatsapp>

²² Op. cit.

²³ Qaiser Felix, 18 September 2007, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/%E2%80%9DBlasphemous%E2%80%9D-Christian-freed-after-a-year:-he-was-innocent.-10331.html>

Another illustrative example of gross injustice is the accusation of blasphemy against an eighth grade pupil at a school near Abbottabad because she misspelled a word in a class test²⁴.

The case of Ayub Masih

In a famous case, Ayub Masih, a Christian, was convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death in 1998. He was accused by a neighbor of stating that he supported British writer Salman Rushdie, author of *The Satanic Verses*. Lower appeals courts upheld the conviction. However, before the Pakistan Supreme Court, his lawyer was able to prove that the accuser had used the conviction to force Masih's family off their land and then acquired control of the property. Furthermore the entire Christian population of the village had been evacuated. Masih was acquitted of all charges and released from death row on 15 August 2002.

It should be noted that at the hearing in the trial court the complainant had shot and injured Mr. Masih, but was never prosecuted by Pakistani authorities and he continued as the main witness for the prosecution. During the trial, religious extremists threatened to kill Mr. Masih, his attorneys, and the judge if Mr. Masih was not convicted. In fact another Pakistani trial court judge had recently been murdered after acquitting two men of blasphemy. Mr. Masih received a death sentence by hanging and while incarcerated in Multan he suffered attacks from other prisoners, denial of medical care for severe skin allergies and hemorrhoids, and solitary confinement in a 2.5m x 2.5m x 2.5m cell where the temperature often exceeded 50 degrees Celcius.

The Supreme Court hearing was a response to appeals from the US Senate and such groups as Freedom Now. The decision set a precedent for other individuals charged with blasphemy. Freedom Now worked closely with the U.S. State Department and other groups to arrange Mr. Masih's quick exit from Pakistan. He arrived in the United States on 4 September 2002 and successfully claimed political asylum.

The most famous blasphemy case so far is that of Aasia Noreen (better known now as Asia Bibi), a Christian woman, now about 50, mother of 5, a farmhand and wife of a brickyard labourer. She was accused of blasphemy in 2009 and is still in prison 8 years later, awaiting the outcome of a Supreme Court appeal. Her story is detailed in attachment 2. In brief, she was accused of blasphemy by the women with whom she was collecting berries, after they saw her drinking water from a cup that the others shared. They condemned her for contaminating the cup, simply because she was a Christian. She was convicted by a local court judge on 8 November 2010 and sentenced to death by hanging. This decision was upheld by a two-member bench of Lahore High Court in October 2014, and the appeal of that decision is now awaiting hearing in the Supreme Court of Pakistan, following several deferrals. The final appeal hearing was scheduled for 13 October 2016 but one of the three judges refused to participate. The resulting adjournment has continued for a year. Defense counsel advocate Saif-ul-Malook said "...*The case continues to be postponed due to the problems of this country. We are in the midst of a continuing war between Islam and Kufr (infidels)*".

Transcripts of the original trial, previously sealed but then obtained by Al Jazeera America in 2015²⁵, raised further questions about how Noreen's case was handled by the court. For example there were numerous and serious inconsistencies in the witness accounts provided by the prosecution. Reporters say they dare not repeat Noreen's testimony lest they also be accused of blasphemy.

Noreen's case has drawn widespread criticism, and calls for her release have come from as far away as the Vatican. International human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have championed her cause.

Two prominent politicians who visited her and declared their support have been murdered. Her family have abandoned their property and gone into hiding.

²⁴ Mentioned by Nasir Saeed, 8 September 2017, "No Home for Persecuted Pakistani Christians in any state", <http://www.pakistanchristianpost.com/headlinenewsd.php?hnewsid=3105>

²⁵ Zehra Abid, 18 June 2015, "Blasphemy in Pakistan: The case of Aasia Bibi", <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/6/18/blasphemy-in-pakistan-the-case-of-aasia-bibi.html>

In September 2017 Noreen was nominated for the Sakharov Prize (considered Europe's most prestigious Human Rights award), for 'Freedom of Thought', by a group of legislators in the European Parliament²⁶. The result is due to be announced at a ceremony in Strasbourg on 10 December 2017.

While this story has commanded headlines, it is far from unique; there are countless lower profile cases. Over the years, dozens of Christian pastors have had to fight against criminal charges²⁷, and more than 100 blasphemy cases are still waiting for court verdicts. Ironically, many of the accused feel they are safer in isolation in prison than they would be if they were to be simply released. Release in a secret location might provide temporary safety from local "lynch mobs", but it is hardly a satisfactory long term solution.

Amnesty International has spoken out strongly against this state of affairs²⁸. Mention is made of frequent abuse by individuals and sectarian groups to settle personal scores or to target religious minorities, flawed trials proceedings at all stages, several people on death row with pending appeals to superior courts, frequent mob violence, and vigilante justice. The report gives details of recent incidents and also notes Amnesty's previous appeals for justice for a Christian couple accused of blasphemy and killed by a "mob"²⁹, and for a Christian woman wrongly sentenced to death for blasphemy³⁰.

Forced displacements

The "second class citizen" status of Christians in Pakistan is indicated by their lack of rights in relation to forced evictions. For example, since 2014, the Capital Development Authority (CDA), a public benefit corporation responsible for providing municipal services in Islamabad, has been targetting and demolishing the Christian "ugly slums" of Islamabad. The Supreme Court put the demolitions on hold and ordered the CDA to provide a written justification for it. In December 2015 the CDA argued that the campaign of destruction would preserve Islamabad's aesthetics and maintain its Muslim-majority demographic balance. Various human rights activists and even some political parties condemned the response. Fortunately, the CDA response failed to impress the court and the demolitions remain on hold.

Resignation to the "neverending plight" of abandonment

In the past Pakistan Christians have occasionally dared to mount public protests following especially vicious attacks on them. However this has changed completely following the brutal suppression of the March 2015 protests in Lahore following the deadly twin bombings of churches at the time of Easter celebrations³¹. Christians poured on to the streets to call for justice, but unfortunately some retaliated when they were attacked, resulting in the deaths of two Muslim men, and the police responded violently. More than 150 men and boys were arbitrarily detained and charged with murder and vandalism. Families and rights groups did not know about the locations of their loved ones for at least 6 weeks after the detentions. Christian men continued to be picked off from the streets and from their beds in the middle of the night for 6 more than months, and a year after the original incident 43 Christians remained in jail on murder charges. After the next major deadly attack on Christians in Lahore, on 27 March 2016, the Christians remained indoors and silent. According to the cited Aljazeera report, this is "*not only out of fear of militants*". Rather, according to the community and several rights activists, it is also the result of a deep sense of resignation, "*a sense of abandonment by the state*".

²⁶ Madeeha Bakhsh, 14 September 2017, "Asia Bibi nominated for EU's Sakharov Prize", <https://www.christiansinpakistan.com/asia-bibi-nominated-for-eus-sakharov-prize/>

²⁷ For example, describing the situation before April 2013, Mohshin Habib, 9 April 2013, "Muslim Persecution of Christians Escalating in Pakistan", <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3664/christian-persecution-pakistan>

²⁸ Amnesty International, March 2017, "Pakistan: Widespread Human Rights Violations Continue", Amnesty International Submission For The UN Universal Periodic Review – 28th Session of the UPR Working Group, November 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa33/6513/2017/en/>

²⁹ "Pakistan: Justice needed for vicious mob killing of Christian couple following blasphemy allegation". Available: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2014/11/pakistan-justice-needed-vicious-mob-killing-christian-couple-following-blas/>

³⁰ "Pakistan: Upholding blasphemy death sentence against Christian woman 'a grave injustice'". Available: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2014/10/pakistan-upholding-blasphemy-death-sentence-against-christian-woman-grave-i/>

³¹ Rabia Mehmood, Aljazeera Opinion, "The neverending plight of Christians in Pakistan", 8 April 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/04/neverending-plight-christians-pakistan-160406095729110.html>.

Tough crackdowns on disempowered Christian people after the protests in the wake of attacks on their community have pushed Pakistani Christians up against the wall.

These sentiments are reflected in an article³² by Professor Altaf Khan of the University of Peshawar (cited above), written after he visited a Christmas service in Peshawar in December 2016. He reported on the heavy security, the tense atmosphere, the sullen presence of the local media, and the sad memories of losses in past acts of violence.

Most Christians I talked to felt a loss of identity, isolation and a deep sense of alienation. There was no nostalgia for the past, nor any enthusiasm for the present. . . .

Centuries of continuous repression have left many without any sense of identity within their home country. Many Christians here just want to breathe – being able to truly live is a distant dream.

The Easter events in Lahore in 2015 are seen as a significant turning point. The pressure had been building for several years, but courage usually overcame fear. Now the balloon has burst.

The widespread detentions during the protests in Youhanabad³³ were not the first experience that Christians had with especially heavy-handed law enforcement.

In 2013, after twin bombings at the All Saints Church in Peshawar which killed at least 80 people, a large number of young Christians agitated in Lahore and Karachi.

Multiple arrests by the Punjab police followed, resulting in a heightened sense of insecurity and vulnerability among Pakistani Christians. Some even applied for asylum abroad, citing state persecution alongside militant violence.

In addition to becoming victims of militancy, these protests were also consequences of years of abuse faced by the community through blasphemy cases and arson attacks by Muslim protesters on Christian settlements and villages.

Clearly the Christians have lost heart, at least for the time being, and have abandoned any thoughts of fighting for their rights. They feel “*deepening disempowerment*”. They place no confidence in government promises and token shows of protection.

A 60-year-old Christian mechanic from Lahore, whose teenage son had been arrested in the night without reason and charged – not just with murder but with terrorism – is reported as saying: “*On Easter after the blasts, my wife cried for hours. I feel like we are marked by the cruelties and violence inflicted upon us forever, and we will never be able to take off this mark.*”

Perhaps that was what inspired the title of the report “*The neverending plight of Christians in Pakistan*”.

Australian DFAT and UK Home Office Opinion

The latest Australian DFAT (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) report³⁴ on Pakistan provides information that is generally consistent with the picture portrayed above. However it fails at the last hurdle by downplaying the risks and deprivations faced by the majority of Christians in Pakistan every day of their lives.

Overall, DFAT assesses that Christians in Pakistan face a low level of official discrimination and a moderate level of societal discrimination. DFAT further assesses that Christians in Pakistan face a moderate risk of communal and sectarian violence, although this risk is mitigated to some extent by community security efforts and police protection.

This statement fails to portray the extreme gravity of the situation and is inconsistent with almost every other expert opinion, including the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and Amnesty International.

³² “Breathing without living: the plight of Christians in Pakistan”, Altaf Khan, Professor, University of Peshawar, 12 January 2017, <https://theconversation.com/breathing-without-living-the-plight-of-christians-in-pakistan-70892>.

³³ Youhanabad: the main majority Christian enclave in Lahore, with a population in excess of 100,000

³⁴ DFAT, September 2017, <http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/country-information-report-pakistan.pdf>

The UK Home Office is just as ambivalent as DFAT in describing the dangers faced by Pakistan's Christians, and this has been strongly criticised by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for International Freedom of Religion or Belief³⁵.

GUIDANCE produced by the Home Office on Christians in Pakistan does not adequately reflect the real risk of persecution in the country, and is being used to justify deportation, even when this puts lives at risk

The APPG has concluded that Christians in Pakistan are at "real risk of persecution in the form of physical violence and psychological torture at the hands of State and non-State actors". It says that it has "deep concerns" about the Home Office's guidance on Pakistani Christians and Christian converts, and says that new guidance is "urgently required" to reflect the situation on the ground. Concerns that the UK guidance contains "serious flaws" were shared by organisations giving evidence to the group, including Amnesty International. [emphasis added]

The guidance is not just causing difficulty for those seeking asylum in the UK, the APPG notes. It is being used to "de-legitimise" the asylum claims of Pakistani Christians in Thailand, even if deporting them to Pakistan will put their lives in danger.

*The guidance currently reflects a tribunal ruling that Christians in Pakistan "suffer discrimination, but this is not sufficient to amount to a real risk of persecution". It also states that the Pakistani government is "willing and able to provide protection against such attacks, and internal relocation is a viable option". **This is contradicted by the Foreign Office's own guidance, which admits that there is "not much protection of religious minorities from the Government".*** [emphasis added]

The APPG report recommends that those writing the Home Office guidance should look at the different Christian denominations in Pakistan, and take note of the fact that communication technology means that information can quickly be passed on about individuals under threat, even if they relocate within Pakistan. It should also take into account the "strong evidence" of the Pakistani authorities' failure to protect minorities. Those assessing asylum cases should be trained in the religious and cultural context, it recommends, and the applications of the dependents of individuals granted asylum on grounds of religious persecution should be fast-tracked.

The APPG's vice-chairman, Lord Alton of Liverpool, who had recently visited the UNHCR Bangkok detention camp, reported on an "appalling" situation and strongly criticised "the dismissal of evidence from Pakistan highlighting an escalation in violence against the tiny Christian minority, and the well-founded fear of lethal persecution".

The outlook and role of the United States

It seems that the United States is also reluctant to acknowledge the extent of the problems faced by religious minorities in Pakistan. A June 2015 article published in the prestigious *Foreign Policy Magazine*³⁶ has called on the US to move beyond even basic acknowledgment to taking strong action:

The U.S. State Department should use its authority to designate Pakistan a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC), . . . which according to the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act must be applied to any nation that "engages in or tolerates particularly severe violations of religious freedom" . . . the single most powerful message the United States can send to a country which consistently fails to protect religious minorities. The United States could then institute economic sanctions and other penalties until Pakistan reforms its policies, putting the appalling treatment of religious minorities in Pakistan at the front and center of U.S-Pakistan relations. Pakistan fits the definition of a CPC more so than any other nation on Earth, with perhaps the exception of North Korea.

Rejection of Asylum Seekers

The June 2015 *Foreign Policy Magazine* article, cited above about the plight of the 40 million members of religious minorities in Pakistan, highlights the issue of Christian refugees:

" . . . religious minorities are fleeing the country in droves. As many as 10,000 Pakistani Christians . . . are now believed to be living "under the radar" in Thailand, fending off arrest by Thai police for illegal entry as they cling to the hope of making it through the grueling U.N. refugee resettlement process. International Christian Concern's

³⁵ Madeleine Davies, 15 February 2017, "Home Office guidance on Pakistan has 'serious flaws', say MPs", <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2016/26-february/news/world/home-office-guidance-on-pakistan-has-serious-flaws-say-mps>

³⁶ Isaac Six, Farahnaz Ispahani, 10 June 2015, "Persecution Without Prosecution: The Fate of Minorities in Pakistan", <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/10/persecution-without-prosecution-the-fate-of-minorities-in-pakistan/>

offices — an NGO that assists Christians who have been the victims of religious persecution — routinely get calls from Pakistanis around the globe pleading for help as they try to find any possible avenue of escape from an endless cycle of violence and discrimination.”³⁷

They “are fleeing the country in droves”, but where does it lead? The failure of “Christian” countries to offer ready asylum to Pakistan Christians is highlighted in a recent article “No Home for Persecuted Pakistani Christians in any State”³⁸ (cited above).

The suffering of Pakistan’s Christian minority is well documented, but what you may not be so aware of is the tragic way in which many of those who muster up the courage to seek refuge in the West are turned away at the door. . . .

With the hatred towards them so intense in their own country, it is natural that Pakistani Christians look to the West as a refuge from the threat of death that they face every day.

Yet the British Government appears almost determined not to let any asylum seeker in, no matter how desperate or endangered their lives back home are. From the moment they submit their application for asylum, Pakistani Christians have a tough time convincing the Border Agency that returning to their homeland is life threatening. [emphasis added]

This is consistent with the discussion above about UK Home Office guidelines.

The cited article by Nasir Saeed provides further significant detail:

To even arrive on British soil is a massive effort for Christians in Pakistan . . . When their applications for asylum in Britain are rejected and their cases simply put onto the fast track procedure, the sense of distress is all the more great for several reasons.

The “several reasons” refers to various barriers to fair process: lack of legal aid, inadequate preparation time, inappropriate interpreters, insufficient Pakistani Christian lawyers, anxiety in relating to the advisers provided, and lack of suitable alternative advisers. The author recommends that

. . . the Pakistani church in Britain must work in tandem with the church in Pakistan to ensure that members of their flock know ahead of time what support is available for them from the church and where they can turn to upon arrival in a foreign and bewildering land. . . . Perhaps then we might see more Pakistani Christians receiving from Britain the shelter and refuge they sincerely need.

The historic links between Britain and Pakistan result in the UK being the most common destination of choice for Pakistani Christian refugees. However other choices are quite common, including Australia. My experience with this category of asylum seekers indicates that the limiting factors mentioned above are closely mirrored in Australia.

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that Pakistan’s Christians live with many forms of persecution and discrimination. But it is worse than that. They are constantly exposed to the possibility of violent mistreatment without any prospect of protection or justice. Furthermore, as emphasised by the Asian Human Rights Commission, “the situation is getting worse with each passing day”. Perhaps the most disturbing threat is the frequent misuse of the notorious blasphemy laws – which make Christians vulnerable to false allegations, unjust trials, prolonged incarceration and mob lynching.

The result is that Pakistan’s Christians live with a hopeless and insoluble climate of intimidation and a deepening sense of disempowerment and fear. They feel abandoned by the authorities and have no confidence in government promises of protection. Their suffering and exposure to danger seems to be “neverending”, indeed escalating.

On this basis, the determination of countries such as the UK and Australia to play down their plight and reject their claims for asylum, whenever they manage to make their way across the borders, can only be described as callous and heartless, and a world away from the original spirit of the International Refugee Convention.

³⁷ Isaac Six, Farahnaz Ispahani, op.cit.

³⁸ Nasir Saeed, 8 September 2017, <http://www.pakistanchristianpost.com/headlinenews.php?hnewsid=3105>

Appendix 1

Major targeted attacks on Christians in Pakistan since 11 September 2001

The following list is extracted from a longer list compiled by The Religion of Peace (TROP), “a non-partisan, fact-based site” which documents attacks on Christians (civilians and church workers) by religious Muslims – on a global basis, carefully excluding incidents associated with war, combat or insurgency.³⁹ The victims are innocent Christians who are specifically targeted and abused solely on account of their faith by those who claim their own religion as a motive. The report states clearly that this is not a complete account “*since much of the violence goes unreported*”. TROP lists 180 incidents for Pakistan after the chosen starting date – the famous 11 September 2001 – resulting in 454 recorded deaths and 1264 people injured. Most of the reported incidents relate to attacks on just one or two people, and of course these are not insignificant.

Selected list: 25 incidents where there were 10 victims or more.

- 31 December 2016, Sukkur, a Muslim group burns down a Christian neighbourhood, injuring 10.
- 27 March 2016, Lahore, a massive suicide blast targeting Christian families celebrating Easter leaves over 78 dead (half of them children), 362 injured.
- 21 December 2015, Suqaylabiyah, Sunnis bomb a Christian neighbourhood, leaving 2 dead, 33 injured.
- 15 March 2015, Lahore, targeted suicide bombings near two churches by Jamaat-ul-Ahrar leave 15 dead worshippers, 70 injured.
- 22 September 2013, Peshawar, two Jundullah suicide bombers kill 105 worshippers at a church service, including many women and children, 150 injured.
- 3 April 2013, Gujranwala, 18 Christians injured by a Muslim crowd whipped into a frenzy by a cleric.
- 9 March, 2013, Lahore, 35 injured as a Muslim mob rampages through a Christian neighbourhood, burning more than 100 homes.
- 25 December 2012, Iqbal, at least a dozen Christian men, women and children injured when attacked with guns and iron rods outside their church.
- 21 September 2012, Mardan, about a dozen Christians “thrashed” as a crowd of thousands burn down a Lutheran church.
- 30 April 2011, Gujranwala, fuelled by rumours of a Quran desecration, a Muslim crowd of hundreds attacks a Christian village, burning homes and assaulting the occupants, injuring 25.
- 17 April 2011, Gujranwala, 12 worshippers at a Pentecostal church pulled out and beaten by a Muslim mob.
- 15 July 2010, Sukkur, 5 members of a church, including the pastor, shot to death outside the building by “Religion of Peace” advocates; 6 others injured.
- 4 April 2010, Punjab, 10 Christians severely beaten by Muslim fundamentalists.

³⁹ <https://www.thereligionofpeace.com/attacks/christian-attacks.aspx>

- 25 December 2009, Kalar Kahar, about 60 Christians injured when a Muslim crowd attacks them during Christmas prayers.
- 24 December 2009, Peshawar, 5 killed and 24 injured when a suicide bomber detonates near a Christian school.
- 28 August 2009, Quetta, 6 Christians shot dead and 7 injured after refusing a 'convert or die' offer from Islamists.
- 1 August 2009, Gojra, 8 Christians burned alive by a mob angered over a rumour of Qur'an desecration; 18 injured.
- 30 July 2009, Gojra City, 7 people, including women and children, burned alive when a Muslim mob rampages through a Christian community over rumors of a Qur'an desecration; 19 injured.
- 13 June 2009.06, Bahawalpur, 10 Christians injured by a Muslim package bomb.
- 2 March 2009, Songo, a 45 year old woman beaten to death and 28 others injured when Muslim radicals open fire on a Presbyterian church, then enter the building.
- 17 March 2002, Islamabad, grenade attack on a Christian church kills 5 worshippers including an American woman and her 17-year-old daughter; 45 others injured.
- 25 December 2002, Daska, 3 girls killed and 14 young women injured by a Christmas grenade attack on a Christian church.
- 25 September 2002, Karachi, 7 killed and 3 injured in an attack on a Christian welfare organization's office - the Idara Amn-O-Insaaf (Institute for Peace and Justice); victims blind-folded, tied to chairs and shot in the head.
- 5 August 2002, Jhika Gali, Murree, 6 killed and 4 injured in attack on Christian missionary school.
- 28 October 2001, Bahawalpur, a policeman and 17 Christians (including 5 children) killed and 9 injured when gunmen open fire on a church.

It is widely understood that few if any of the perpetrators have been brought to justice.

Appendix 2

The story of the blasphemy case against Aasia Noreen

The most famous blasphemy case so far in Pakistan is that of Aasia Noreen (better known now as Asia Bibi), a Christian woman, now about 50, mother of 5 and wife of a poor farmer, accused of blasphemy in 2009 and still in prison 8 years later awaiting the outcome of a Supreme Court appeal.

Her story is instructive on several levels. The following account is an edited and amended abridgment of the well documented Wikipedia entry on the internet.⁴⁰

Summary

In June 2009, Aasia Noreen was involved in an argument with a group of Muslim women with whom she had been harvesting berries – after the other women became angry with her for drinking the same water as them. She was subsequently accused of insulting the prophet Muhammad, a charge she denies. She was arrested and imprisoned. In November 2010, a local court judge sentenced her to death. She became the first woman condemned to death in Pakistan on blasphemy charges.

The local court sentence needed to be upheld by a superior court. Noreen's husband appealed the verdict and eventually, on 16 October 2014 the Lahore High Court dismissed the appeal and upheld the death sentence. On 20 November 2014, her husband appealed to Pakistan's President for clemency. On 24 November 2014, her lawyer appealed to the Supreme Court of Pakistan. On 22 July 2015 the Supreme Court suspended Noreen's death sentence for the duration of the appeals process. After a number of postponements the Supreme Court has still not been convened to hear the appeal and Noreen continues to languish in prison.

The case received worldwide attention and various petitions were organized to protest Noreen's imprisonment. Pope Benedict XVI publicly called for the charges against her to be dismissed. She received less sympathy from her neighbours and Islamic religious leaders in the country, some of whom adamantly called for her to be executed. Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, the only Christian in cabinet, and Muslim politician Salmaan Taseer, Governor of Punjab Province, were both assassinated for advocating on her behalf and opposing the blasphemy laws.

Noreen's family went into hiding after receiving death threats, some of which included threats to kill Noreen too if she were to be released from prison.

Personal background

Aasiya Noreen was born and raised in Ittan Wali, a small, rural village in the Sheikhpura District of Punjab, Pakistan, 50 km from Lahore. She is a Catholic. From when she was young she worked as a farmhand in Sheikhpura to support her family. She married Ashiq Masih, also a Christian, a brick labourer who had three children from a previous marriage, and had two more children with him. Noreen and her family were the only Christians in the village and she had been repeatedly urged by her fellow workers to convert to Islam.

Details of original incident

In June 2009, Noreen was harvesting *falsa* berries with a group of other farmhands when she was asked to fetch water from a nearby well. She complied, but stopped to take a drink with an old metal cup she had found lying next to the well. A neighbour of Noreen, who had been involved in a running feud with Noreen's family about some property damage, saw her do this and angrily told her that it was forbidden for a Christian to drink water from the same utensil from which Muslims drink. Some of the other workers considered her to be unclean because she was a Christian. Arguments ensued and Noreen recounts that when they made derogatory statements about her religion, she responded, "*I believe in my religion and in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for the sins of mankind. What did your Prophet Mohammed ever do to save mankind?*"

Later, some of the workers complained to a cleric that Noreen insulted Muhammad. What they accused her of saying, which would be stated in the later court verdict, differs from her version. A mob came to her house, beating her and members of her family before she was rescued by the police. The police initiated an investigation about her remarks, resulting in her arrest under Section 295 C of the Pakistan Penal Code. She was imprisoned for over a year before being formally charged.

Prosecution and imprisonment

Noreen denied that she had committed blasphemy and said that she had been accused by her neighbour in order to "*settle an old score*". In November 2010, Muhammed Naveed Iqbal, a judge at the local court of Sheikhpura, Punjab, sentenced her to death by hanging and imposed a fine of the equivalent of USD 1,100.

Noreen described the day of her sentencing as follows:

I cried alone, putting my head in my hands. I can no longer bear the sight of people full of hatred, applauding the killing of a poor farm worker. I no longer see them,

⁴⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asia_Bibi_blasphemy_case

but I still hear them, the crowd who gave the judge a standing ovation, saying: "Kill her, kill her! Allahu Akbar!" The court house is invaded by a euphoric horde who break down the doors, chanting: "Vengeance for the holy prophet. Allah is great!" I was then thrown like an old rubbish sack into the van... I had lost all humanity in their eyes.

Noreen's husband announced that he planned to appeal the verdict – which was not operative unless upheld by the Lahore High Court. A month later, Salmaan Taseer, the governor of Punjab who investigated the affair for the Pakistan President, stated that Noreen would most likely be pardoned if the High Court did not suspend the sentence. The President was poised to grant pardon but Lahore High Court issued a stay order against potential Presidential pardon, which has remained in force.

Transcripts of the original trial, previously sealed but then obtained by Al Jazeera America in 2015, raised further questions about how the case was handled by the court. For example there were numerous and serious inconsistencies in the witness accounts provided by the prosecution. Reporters say they dare not repeat Noreen's testimony lest they also be accused of blasphemy.

Noreen was put in solitary confinement in a 2.4m × 3.0m cell without windows at the Lahore prison. Before his assassination, Governor Taseer visited her at the jail several times with his wife and daughter, though Pakistani court officials later ruled that she could be visited only by her husband and lawyer. The prison superintendent said that while he wanted her to be treated "like any other prisoner", she had to be kept away from other inmates for her own well-being – because other people accused of blasphemy had been killed while in prison. Out of concern that she could be poisoned, prison officials began giving Noreen raw materials to cook her own food. The Masihi Foundation, a human rights group, described her physical condition as "very frail", and her health was reported to be in decline due to poor living conditions at the jail. She was threatened by other inmates and subjected to physical abuse from prison guards.

According to Human Rights Watch, Noreen's situation is not unusual. People accused of blasphemy often remain imprisoned for long periods while their cases are being processed. In May 2014, Noreen's appeal hearing was delayed for the fifth time.

High Court decision and subsequent appeals

On 16 October 2014 the Lahore High Court dismissed Noreen's appeal and upheld her death sentence. On 20 November 2014, her husband appealed to Pakistan's President for clemency. On 24 November 2014, her lawyer appealed to the Supreme Court.

On 22 July 2015 the Supreme Court of Pakistan suspended Noreen's death sentence for the duration of the appeals process. In November 2015, Noreen's lead attorney, Naeem Shakir, announced that, after two postponements in 2015, the Lahore High Court would hear an appeal on 26 March 2016. The hearing was rescheduled for 13 October 2016, but on that morning one of the three members of the designated bench of judges, Iqbal Hameedur Rehman, refused to participate. This led to indefinite postponement. On 26 April 2017, Chief Justice of Pakistan Mian Saqib Nisar declined a request for a hearing of "the case of Asia Bibi" to be held in the first week of June – made by her Muslim lawyer Saiful Malook.

Local reactions

Noreen's conviction led to divided opinions on the blasphemy laws and drew strong reactions from the public. Pakistani Human Rights Watch researcher Ali Dayan Hasan said, "The law creates this legal infrastructure which is then used in various informal ways to intimidate, coerce, harass and persecute." He further described the law as "discriminatory and abusive".

The imprisonment of Noreen left Christians and other minorities in Pakistan feeling vulnerable, and it was reported that liberal Muslims were also unnerved by her sentencing.

Pakistan's Minority Affairs Minister Shahbaz Bhatti joined Governor Taseer in publicly supporting Noreen, saying, "I will go to every knock for justice on her behalf and I will take all steps for her protection." She also received support from Pakistani political scientist Rasul Baksh Rais and local priest Samson Dilawar.

The general population was less sympathetic towards Noreen. Several signs were erected in Sheikhpura and other rural areas declaring support for the blasphemy laws, including one that called for Noreen to be beheaded. Mohammad Saleem, a member of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Pakistan Party, organized a demonstration in Rawalpindi and led a small crowd chanting, "Hang her, hang her." In December 2010, a month after Noreen's conviction, a Muslim cleric announced a 500,000 Pakistani rupee (equivalent to USD 10,000) award to anyone who would kill her. One survey reported that around 10 million Pakistanis had said that they would be willing to personally kill her out of either religious conviction or for the reward. The village mosque in Ittan Wali was reportedly indifferent towards Noreen's plight; its imam, Qari Mohammed Salim, stated that he had wept for joy on learning that she had been sentenced to death and threatened that some people would "take the law into their own hands" should she be

pardoned or released. However, journalist Julie McCarthy suggested that the country's "*more peaceful majority views*" had been overshadowed by the more vocal fundamentalists.

Noreen's family has received threats and has gone into hiding. Ashiq, her husband, stated that he was afraid to let their children go outside. He also expressed concern about how Noreen would be kept safe should she be released, saying, "No one will let her live. The mullahs are saying they will kill her when she comes out." Her family declined to leave the country while she remained in prison, but Italy, France, and Spain all offered to grant her and her family asylum in the event of her release.[15]

Assassinations of Taseer and Bhatti

On 4 January 2011, at Kohsar Market of Islamabad, the governor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, was assassinated by Malik Mumtaz Hussein Qadri, a 26-year-old member of his security team, because of his defence of Noreen and opposition to the blasphemy law. (Mumtaz Qadri was sentenced to death for the assassination and hanged on 29 February 2016.) Taseer was outspoken in his criticism of the law and the verdict in Noreen's case. The next day, thousands turned up for the governor's funeral in Lahore in spite of warnings by the Taliban and some clerics, while a portion of the Pakistani population also praised Qadri as a hero. Thousands of Sunni Muslims rallied in support of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan after the murder, and 500 Bareilvi clerics prohibited their followers from sending condolences to the family of Taseer. This resulted in voiced concerns that the public was becoming tolerant of extremists.

Prison officials said that Noreen "wept inconsolably" on learning of Taseer's assassination, while repeatedly saying, "*That man came here and he sacrificed his life for me.*" Father Andrew Nisari, a senior Catholic Spokesperson in Lahore, described the situation as "utter chaos". Seven months later, Taseer's 28-year-old son, Shahbaz, was kidnapped. Shahbahz was eventually found or released in March 2016, and he returned to Lahore on 9 March after five years in captivity.

Minority Affairs Minister Shahbaz Bhatti said that he was first threatened with death in June 2010 when he was told that he would be beheaded if he attempted to change the blasphemy laws. In response, he told reporters that he was "*committed to the principle of justice for the people of Pakistan*" and willing to die fighting for Noreen's release. On 2 March 2011, Bhatti was shot dead by gunmen who ambushed his car near his residence in Islamabad, presumably because of his position on the blasphemy laws. He had been the only Christian member of Pakistan's cabinet.

International response

Noreen's death sentence drew international outrage and strong condemnation from human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch who described the blasphemy laws as a form of religious persecution and called for them to be abolished.

Pope Benedict XVI publicly called for clemency for Noreen, describing his "*spiritual closeness*" with her and urging that the "*human dignity and fundamental rights of everyone in similar situations*" be respected.

Her case also attracted extensive media coverage, and US journalist John L. Allen, Jr. wrote that she is "*almost certainly the most famous illiterate Punjabi farm worker and mother of five on the planet*". According to Allen, she has become a celebrity among Christian activists, contrasting with the usual situation with cases of discrimination against Christian minorities. A number of campaigns have been organized to protest her imprisonment through online petitions, Twitter trends, and concerts. Ooberfuse, a Christian pop band based in the United Kingdom collaborated with the British Pakistani Christian Association in releasing a song entitled "*Free Asia Bibi*" with a music video that included "*a disturbing visual portrayal of the squalid prison conditions where Bibi is being held*". She has also been the subject of books and documentaries.

One petition received over 400,000 signatures from people from over 100 countries. Another petition, organised by the American Center for Law & Justice (ACLJ), obtained over 200,000 signatures and called for US aid to Pakistan (said to be cumulatively eight billion dollars) to stop whilst persecution of minorities is allowed in that country.

Memoirs

French journalist Anne-Isabelle Tollet assisted Noreen in writing a memoir titled "*Blasphemy: A Memoir: Sentenced to Death over a Cup of Water*" (2013, ISBN 1613748892). Noreen is illiterate, and Tollet was unable to visit her directly due to prison restrictions, but Tollet was able to conduct interviews through Noreen's husband, who passed questions and answers between them. Tollet also met other members of Noreen's family, including her children and sister, and had known Shahbaz Bhatti before his assassination.

Sakharov Prize nomination

In September 2017 Noreen was nominated for the Sakharov Prize (considered Europe's most prestigious Human Rights award), for 'Freedom of Thought', by a group of legislators in the European Parliament. The result is due to be announced at a ceremony in Strasbourg on 10 December 2017.