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## **PAKISTAN: Appeal in blasphemy case postponed 70 times**

By John Pontifex

Independent Catholic News (14.06.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2AvAHSY> – A lawyer fighting the conviction of a Christian man serving a life sentence for blasphemy in Pakistan says the appeal hearing has been postponed almost 70 times. Nearly 11 years after advocate Khalil Tahir Sandhu submitted the first appeal petition in Lahore High Court challenging the conviction of Imran Masih, the lawyer said the case had passed through the hands of at least 10 justices.

Eyewitnesses claimed that in July 2009 Mr Masih set fire to books containing verses of the Qur'an, while he was clearing out the grocery shop, which he ran at Haq Favid Chowk, Hajveri Town, Faisalabad.

In an interview with Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), Mr Sandhu said that the case against Mr Masih was weakened by "substantial contradictions" in eyewitness statements concerning the date and time of the alleged incident and whether or not they were capable of reading the Arabic script reportedly containing the Quranic text.

Mr Sandhu said high court justices were reluctant to hold appeal hearings, and sometimes feared for their lives, in case of a hostile reaction from Islamist mobs determined to punish those – especially people from religious minorities – accused of blasphemy.

The lawyer said: "I have tried my very best to get justice for Imran and will continue to do so. I remain hopeful that he will be acquitted. In our country, what so often happens is that they first arrest the accused and only later do they check the evidence."

He said accusations of corruption meant that police evidence was not always reliable and that the accusers are often motivated by vendettas and greed.

He added: "The parents of Imran died because they were so shocked about what happened to him."

Mr Sandhu said that, after the latest adjournment, Mr Masih's next hearing date at Lahore High Court had been set for 6th July 2020.

The alleged incident involving Mr Masih took place less than a month after that of Christian farm labourer Asia Bibi, also from Punjab Province, who was sentenced to death in 2010 for blasphemy against the Muslim Prophet Mohammad.

By the time the Supreme Court of Pakistan overturned Asia Bibi's conviction in October 2018 it had taken more than nine years to resolve the case.

Pakistan is a priority country for Aid to the Church in Need, which provides legal and paralegal aid for victims of blasphemy and their families, working closely with organisations including the Lahore-based National Commission for Justice and Peace.

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