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PAKISTAN: Hearing at the EP of a Christian couple, formerly sentenced to death

Hearing of a Christian couple, formerly sentenced to death in Pakistan, at the European Parliament

By Manel Msalmi and Willy Fautré

HRWF (23.05.2022) – On Wednesday 18 May 2022, **Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar**, a Christian couple sentenced to death in

Pakistan on blasphemy charges in 2014 and kept on the death row until their acquittal in June 2021, were welcomed with open arms at the European Parliament to testify about their ordeal.

The event was organized by **MEPs Peter van Dalen and Carlo Fidanza, co-chairs of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious tolerance** and attended by other MEPs, such as the Vice President of the European Parliament **Othmar Karas** (EPP Political Group) and **Charlie Weimers** (ECR Political Group).

The conference started with an exchange of views between the Christian couple who after their acquittal was granted asylum in a European country. They said they were grateful to Europe for welcoming their family and guaranteeing their safety and security.

Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar said they were “happy and relieved to be free.” They were grateful to the three members of the EP Intergroup on FORB – Peter van Dalen (EPP), Bert-Jan Ruissen (ECR), Joachim Kuhs (ID) – who had filed a written parliamentary question about their situation on 10 February 2021 which was addressed to Josep Borrell, High Representative/ Vice President of the European Commission.

They also thanked the European Parliament which on 29 April 2021 had adopted a Resolution on Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan, focusing in particular on their personal case saying in its very first point:

“whereas Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, a Christian couple, were imprisoned in 2013 and sentenced to death in 2014

for blasphemy; whereas they have been accused of sending “blasphemous” text messages to a mosque cleric insulting the Prophet Muhammad, using a sim card registered in Shagufta’s name; whereas both the accused have consistently denied all allegations and believe that her National Identity Card was purposely misused;

the European Parliament

Strongly condemns the imprisonment and sentencing of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, as well as the continued delay of their appeal hearing;

calls on the Pakistani authorities to immediately and unconditionally release them, and to provide them and their lawyer adequate security now and upon release;

calls on the Lahore High Court to hold the appeal hearing without delay and to strike down the verdict in accordance with human rights;”

681 members of the European Parliament voted in favor of the resolution: only three MEPs opposed it.

The pressure exerted by the EU institutions was finally successful as the Christian couple who had spent eight years in prison was released a month and a half later.

The intervention of Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar was followed by their lawyer’s, Saif Ul Malook, who shared his views and thoughts regarding blasphemy laws. Saif Ul Malook was also the lawyer of Asia Bibi, arrested in June 2009 and

sentenced to death by hanging in 2018. After the visit of Jan Figel, EU Special Representative on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Supreme Court of Pakistan acquitted her based on insufficient evidence. Saif Ul Malook lives under high protection and goes on receiving death threats accusing him to be a "traitor of Islam". He said that he is ready to defend faithful of Christianity and Islam in the same way because in each of these two religions, "God asks to save the innocent and protect life," according to him. "To save a life is to save humanity," he said.

The debate was followed by some reflections on the situation in Pakistan by Jean -Paul Van der Walle from "ADF International" and Jan Dirk Van Nifterik from the Dutch foundation "Hulp Vervolgde Christenen" (Help Persecuted Christians).

Mr Joel Voordewind, a former MP in the Netherlands, argued that the EU should "stand with the minorities who are affected by the blasphemy laws in Pakistan." He added: "We are not talking about numbers but we are dealing with people." Individual cases give a face to the numbers of victims who are killed, beaten and even stoned or burnt to death. The question is "What can we do as politicians to make a change?". The answer is "EU resolutions. They are useful to fight against blasphemy laws and the Human Rights Council in Geneva must support the European Parliament resolutions for freedom of religion and against the death penalty." According to a research by an Australian university on the death penalty, 1600 people have been in jail in Pakistan on the grounds of blasphemy, the majority of them being Muslims. Twelve countries still have death penalties for non-believers on apostasy and blasphemy.

MEP Peter Van Dalen is working on an EU resolution supporting a UN resolution against the death penalty to put pressure on the 12 countries whose laws allow death sentences in cases of change of religion. The resolution will be introduced by the EPP Group. A draft of the EU resolution will be discussed in July 2022 in the plenary session as an emergency.

The lawyer of the Christian Pakistani couple, Mr Malook, stressed that the EU should be firm with the imams coming from Pakistan and vigilant about their teachings.

In their last remarks, the couple and their children said that they are happy and thankful to the EU for welcoming them as they feel that they are free for the first time in their lives.

MEP Peter Van Dalen, as a co-chair of the Intergroup on freedom of religion and belief, regretted in his conclusion that unfortunately left-wing MEPs are reluctant in bringing freedom of religion issues on the agenda and sometimes block EU resolutions introduced by the EPP Group. And he added that the European Parliament wanted the EU to review Pakistan's eligibility for GSP+ status as long as there is no substantial improvement of its human rights and religious freedom record.

Photo : MEP Peter Van Dalen

[Further reading about FORB in Pakistan on HRWF website](#)

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