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US group appeals for Pakistani woman jailed on blasphemy

By Kathy Gannon

AP News (08.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3bvK3hg> - The U.S. religious watchdog appealed Friday for the rights of a Pakistani woman from the country's minority Ahmadis who has been jailed on blasphemy charges, declaring her a prisoner of conscience and urging Prime Minister Imran Khan's government to immediately set her free.

The statement by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said 55-year-old Ramazan Bibi was jailed last April under Pakistan's draconian blasphemy law that carries the death penalty.

Under the law, anyone accused of insulting Islam can be sentenced to death if found guilty. While authorities have yet to carry out a death sentence for blasphemy, just the accusation of blasphemy can incite mobs in Pakistan.

"The Pakistani government must immediately release Ramzan Bibi, and all others detained for blasphemy," said commission head James W. Carr.

Domestic and international human rights groups say blasphemy allegations have often been used to intimidate religious minorities in Pakistan and to settle personal scores.

"Authorities allowing these laws to be used for personal gain or vendetta are only enabling systematic discrimination based on religious belief," Carr added.

The Ahmadi faith was established on the Indian subcontinent in the 19th century by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, whose followers believe he was the messiah that was promised by the Prophet Muhammad. Pakistan's parliament declared Ahmadis non-Muslims in 1974. Since then, they have repeatedly been targeted by Islamic extremists in the Muslim-majority nation.

Bibi was jailed after a dispute over a donation she tried to make to a non-Ahmadi mosque in her village in Punjab province. The donation was rejected and when she sought an explanation from her non-Ahmadi relatives, a quarrel erupted followed by an assault on Bibi, according to members of her community.

Mainstream Muslim clerics later alleged she was blasphemous and brought out an alleged witness to corroborate their allegations.

"She is facing imprisonment simply because of her Ahmadi faith," said the U.S. commission.

The Pakistani prime minister's special adviser on religious affairs and religious harmony, Maulana Tahir Ashrafi, said he was not aware of the case but would investigate and promised "justice" for the woman.

"No Muslims will be allowed to hurt the sentiments of people belonging to other religions and no non-Muslim should insult Islam," said Ashrafi.

Blasphemy has been a contentious issue in Pakistan. A Punjab governor was killed by his own guard in 2011 after he defended a Christian woman, Aasia Bibi, who was accused of blasphemy. She was acquitted after spending eight years on death row and later left Pakistan for Canada to join her family after receiving threats.

In just the last year, more than 24 Ahmadis, including their senior leadership have been charged with blasphemy and for referring to themselves as Muslims. Scores of Ahmadis are in jail simply for reciting Islamic prayers or greeting others with a traditional Muslim greeting.

Last year, five Ahmadis were killed in targeted killings in Pakistan, according to an Ahmadi official who spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing for his life.

According to a report last month by the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedoms, Pakistan recorded the most cases of blasphemy in the world, even though 84 countries have criminal blasphemy laws.

On Friday, an anti-terrorism court in Islamabad sentenced three people — two Sunni Muslims and an Ahmadi — to death in connection with charges that they shared blasphemous content on social media in 2017. A fourth man, a Shiite Muslim college professor, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for insulting God during a college lecture.

The U.S. commission described the conditions for religious freedoms in Pakistan as continuing to "trend negatively" and urged the government to repeal the blasphemy law.

Pakistan has rejected the commission's assessment.

The Parliament of the World's Religions calls for invoking the 25th Amendment of the US Constitution to remove Donald J. Trump from office

Parliament of Religions (07.01.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3q3gYxR> – The Trustees of the Parliament of the World's Religions call on the Vice-President and the Cabinet of the United States to transmit to the President pro tempore of the United States Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives their written declaration that the President is unfit and therefore unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office, in accordance with Article 4 of the 25th Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Donald J. Trump has forsaken his credibility and demonstrated that he is incapable of discharging the powers and duties of the Office of the President of the United States of America. The Parliament of the World's Religions is a global institution and recognizes the influence that the President of the United States has on the world. Those with the greatest opportunity and power to affect the world have the greatest responsibility to act with unflinching moral integrity. The Parliament of the World's Religions remains

committed to a culture of non-violence and a life of truthfulness, as agreed upon in our signature document *Towards A Global Ethic (Towards A Global Ethic: A Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions)*:

Persons who hold political power must work within the framework of a just order and commit themselves to the most non-violent, peaceful solutions possible...for the leaders of countries, politicians, and political parties, to whom we entrust our own freedoms. When they lie in the faces of their people, when they manipulate the truth, or when they are guilty of venality or ruthlessness in domestic or foreign affairs, they forsake their credibility and deserve to lose their offices and their voters.

The Parliament of the World's Religions cultivates harmony among the world's spiritual traditions and fosters their engagement with guiding institutions in order to achieve a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world. Its origins are rooted to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where the historic first convening of the World Parliament of Religions created a global platform for engagement of religions of the east and west. Headquartered in Chicago, IL, USA, the Parliament of the World's Religions is an international 501c3 NGO affiliated to the United Nations Department of Public Information.

The Parliament hosts the world's premier interfaith convening in cities across the globe. Past Parliaments have convened nearly 60,000 people across the world in Chicago, IL, USA; Cape Town, South Africa; Barcelona, Spain; Melbourne, Australia; Salt Lake City, USA; and Toronto, Canada.

USCIRF Commissioner James W. Carr adopts Ramzan Bibi in Pakistan through the Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project

USCIRF (07.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/35qDU29> - United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Commissioner James W. Carr today announced his adoption of Ramzan Bibi through the Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project.

On April 30, 2020, Ramzan Bibi, a 55-year-old Ahmadi woman, was detained and accused of making blasphemous remarks during a personal dispute over the return of her charitable donation to a local mosque in Cheleki village in Pakistan's Punjab province. Bibi was charged under Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, an offence that carries the death penalty. She is currently imprisoned at Central Jail Lahore.

"The Pakistani government must immediately release Ramzan Bibi, and all others detained for blasphemy," said Commissioner Carr. "Authorities allowing these laws to be used for personal gain or vendetta are only enabling systematic discrimination based on religious belief. This is clear in Bibi's case, as she is facing imprisonment simply because of her Ahmadi faith. The Pakistani government needs to repeal blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws and until this is accomplished, enact comprehensive reform."

A village committee formed in Cheleki to investigate the case concluded that there was no evidence to prove the accusations of blasphemy against Bibi. However, hardline Muslim clerics compelled a non-Ahmadi resident of the village, who was not present during the dispute, falsely testify against Bibi resulting in her incarceration.

Bibi's bail application was rejected by the judge on November 18. An appeal has been filed for the mother of six, who has been waiting in jail throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In its 2020 Annual Report, USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Department of State continue to designate Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern, a recommendation USCIRF has made since 2002 due to Pakistan's systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief.

In December 2020, USCIRF published a report on Violating Rights: Enforcing the World's Blasphemy Laws, which examines the enforcement of blasphemy laws worldwide. This report found that the country with the most cases of state enforced blasphemy laws was Pakistan, with 184 cases identified between 2014-2018. In June, USCIRF released a Policy Update on Pakistan that outlines the path for reforming and eventually repealing its blasphemy law.
