

PRISONER PROFILE

Prisoner Name: **ASIA BIBI**

Location: **Pakistan**

Arrested: **June 2008**

Sentence: **Death Penalty**

RELEASED: **May 2019**

Arrest and background

Aasiya Noreen, commonly known as Asia Bibi, is the first woman to be sentenced to death for blasphemy in Pakistan. The farmworker was arrested in 2009 after her Muslim co-workers alleged that she had committed blasphemy during an argument about sharing the same water bowl. According to Asia's statement, she was asked to collect water. When she returned, several Muslim women labourers objected, saying that, as a Christian, she must not touch the water bowl. At that point a row broke out. A few days later, Asia says she was beaten by a mob after the women claimed she had insulted Mohammed. She was later arrested and sentenced to death under Pakistan's blasphemy law. During the incident Asia reportedly witnessed to her faith in the resurrection of Jesus.

In November 2010, she was sentenced to death by a Pakistani trial court, a decision that was upheld by the Lahore High Court in October 2014. Under Pakistani law, blasphemous acts include making derogatory remarks against the Muslim prophet Mohammed and defiling the Koran. Blasphemy is an extremely sensitive issue in Pakistan, with even unproven allegations often prompting mob violence, and acquittals in court are rare.

Asia has claimed that she had not made any blasphemous remarks, and that rather her fellow villagers had levelled the allegation against her based on a personal feud. Her lawyer has consistently argued that the blasphemy allegation was concocted by others to target her because of her Christian faith and had no basis in fact.

In 2013, 38 individuals were imprisoned in Pakistan on blasphemy charges. Pakistanis who have sought changes to the blasphemy laws or who have defended those wrongly accused have often been killed, demonstrating the rise in religious intolerance and support for extremist ideologies in the country. In early 2011, Pakistan's Governor of the Punjab Salman Taseer and Minority Affairs Minister Shahbaz Bhatti were assassinated by religious extremists because of their efforts to defend Bibi and repeal the controversial blasphemy laws.

The miscarriage of justice against Asia is just one example of declining religious freedom in Pakistan and a particularly pernicious example of the negative effects of the blasphemy laws. The allegations

of blasphemy have meant that her family has been forced to go into hiding, and Muslim clerics have placed a \$5,000 bounty on her head. As a result of being charged, the prolonged period of imprisonment, prison conditions, ill treatment and the ongoing threat to her life have led to significant health challenges for Asia, including intestinal bleeding, that could be life-threatening.



July 2015 - A glimmer of hope

On Wednesday, July 22, the Supreme Court suspended her sentence and ordered an examination of all records pertaining to the incident, according to Asia's lawyer. 'The execution of Asia Bibi has been suspended and will remain suspended until the decision of this appeal,' Saif ul-Malook said.

Mr ul-Malook said he had filed a petition on behalf of his client, requesting that the court examine Asia's sentence as the original trial had not been conducted 'on a fair basis'. No date had been set for her execution, he added.

If the Supreme Court rules in favour of Asia, the court would overturn the decision by the Lahore High Court to sentence her to death. If she were released from jail, her life would still be in grave danger from vigilantes who could decide to take the law into their own hands.

UPDATE NOVEMBER 2018

Asia Bibi was acquitted by the Supreme Court in Lahore on October 31 after eight years on death row. Due to concerns about her safety she was kept in confinement before being flown to Islamabad and held in 'protective custody'. As of November 2018 her exact whereabouts were still unknown. Extremists in Pakistan angered by her acquittal had organised protests calling for her execution.

UPDATE MAY 2019

After spending six months in 'protective custody' Asia was allowed to leave Pakistan and fly to Canada to join two of her daughters who had already been given asylum there.

UPDATED 8/5/19 Through our international network of missions, Release International serves persecuted Christians in more than 30 countries around the world by supporting pastors and Christian prisoners, and their families; supplying Christian literature and Bibles; and working for justice.

© Release International 2019 www.releaseinternational.org/prisoners