News



Asia Bibi, a Pakistani Catholic acquitted of blasphemy, listens during a 2010 news conference after her 2009 arrest. Pakistani authorities have freed Bibi, and she has flown to Canada to join her family at a secret address.(CNS/Reuters/Asad Karim)

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Pakistani authorities freed Asia Bibi, a Catholic woman acquitted of blasphemy, and she has flown to Canada to join her family at a secret address.

Her release was confirmed May 8 by Wilson Chowdhry of the British Pakistani Christian Association, who has been in almost daily contact with Ashiq Masih, Bibi's husband.

In a statement sent by email to Catholic News Service, Chowdhry, who is based in London, said a British diplomat confirmed early May 8 that Bibi had left her country.

"Ashiq has always remained hopeful of an imminent release from Pakistan, and we have both been shocked at how long it has taken," he said.

"Asia Bibi and Ashiq have remained resolute in their faith and have prayed daily for their release, and today God has answered their prayers," he added.

Chowdhry said Bibi was "unwell" after being held in isolation for nearly a decade.

"She must be treated with utmost care and receive appropriate medical care now she is free," he said.

"The Pakistani government must ensure Asia and her family are compensated for the loss to their freedom and the fragile safety they have had to suffer under their auspices," he continued. "Moreover, moves must be made to reform or abrogate the infamous blasphemy laws of Pakistan."

Bibi's release was subsequently confirmed by Saiful Malook, the lawyer who represented her in the Supreme Court of Pakistan.

"She was reunited with her family in Canada more than five hours ago," he told ucanews.com May 8.

Bibi, a mother of five, was sentenced to hang for allegedly insulting Muhammad, the founder of Islam, under Section 295C of the Penal Code.

A farmhand, she was accused of blasphemy in June 2009 following a dispute with Muslim co-workers, who objected to her drinking from a common water supply because she is a Christian. Bibi has always denied the allegation.

For her own safety, she had been held in solitary confinement since November 2010, when she was convicted, and while she was incarcerated she saw sunlight for just

two hours a month.

Both before and after her acquittal, Islamic extremists have been vocal in demanding that she be hanged.

Extremists also murdered two senior politicians who championed her cause. Punjab Gov. Salmaan Taseer was assassinated in 2011 and Minority Affairs Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, a Catholic, was gunned down two months later.

Bibi failed in her 2016 appeal against conviction at Pakistan's High Court, but in October 2018, she was exonerated by the Supreme Court.

Her release was initially held up by a petition to the Supreme Court submitted by Tehreek-e-Labbaik, an extremist group linked to the Taliban.

The petition was dismissed in January, yet Bibi's family was forced to wait three months before authorities released her.

Reports in the British media blamed the delay on the reluctance of the Pakistani army to agree to the release, amid the fear that she would be publicly critical of her treatment.

Paul Coleman of ADF International, a faith-based legal advocacy organization that advocated at the U.N. for Bibi's release, said he was delighted that she was free.

"Sadly, Asia Bibi's case is not an isolated incident but testifies to the plight that many Christians and other religious minorities experience in Pakistan today," he said.

"While the right to religious freedom is protected by the Pakistani constitution, many face severe persecution and denial of their fundamental rights to freedom of expression and assembly," he said.

"Blasphemy laws directly violate international law," he added. "All people have the right to freely choose, and live out, their faith. We, therefore, urge all governments to uphold this right by ceasing enforcement and initiating repeal of their blasphemy laws."

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