



CHURCH IN CHAINS

AN IRISH VOICE FOR PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS

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Minister pledges to amend Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws

Shab haz Bhatti (Minister for Minorities in Pakistan) has pledged again to amend the country's controversial Blasphemy Laws which have often been described as being at the root of communal tension in the country.

Speaking last Saturday in London at Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Annual Conference, Mr Bhatti said, *"The blasphemy laws have remained a tool in the hands of extremists to victimise minorities and innocent Muslims in Pakistan. The government is in consultation with political parties, church leaders, civic organisations and Islamic scholars about the current situation and following that consultation we will table legislation to amend the Blasphemy Laws."*

In an interview with David Turner (National Co-ordinator, Church in Chains), Mr. Bhatti outlined the details of the proposed amendments.

- 1. Same punishment for false accusations as for offences**
- 2. Cases to be registered with local session court rather than with police**
- 3. Intention to blaspheme to be included in the laws**

Mr. Bhatti is a Roman Catholic who was previously head of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance. He spoke passionately of his long-standing commitment to religious freedom. He also appealed to delegates to pray for him (one minute per day) so that he can more effectively serve the suffering minority people of Pakistan.



PRAY... for God's protection on Mr. Bhatti as he seeks to help many innocent people by amending the Blasphemy Laws.

News from Iran, Egypt & Mexico



Maryam and Marzieh acquitted on one charge in Iran



Maryam Rustampoor (27) and Marzieh Amirizadeh (30) appeared in court in Tehran last Wednesday (7 October). There was a new judge presiding, and unlike the previous judges, he was sympathetic. He acquitted Maryam and Marzieh on the charge of anti-state activities, which rarely happens. This is a great relief for the two women and their lawyer was very pleased.

Their case has been transferred from the revolutionary court to the general court. It will now have to consider the other two charges against them: Propagation of the Christian faith and Apostasy.

The two young Christian women (who were born into Muslim families) have been detained in overcrowded conditions in Evin prison in Tehran for the past seven months.

Both Maryam and Marzieh continue to be frail with ill health.

On Sunday 4 October Maryam had severe food poisoning and only after much insistence did the prison authorities relent and give her medical attention.

Maryam and Marzieh's story has spread across the Christian world. Their faithfulness to Christ expressed clearly at their previous court hearing in August has encouraged countless believers and strengthened their faith. At that hearing, the judge instructed, **"You should renounce your faith verbally and in written form."** They stood firm and replied, **"We will not deny our faith."** In Iran, many Christians have resolved to be faithful to Christ and have become more courageous in following Jesus.

Maryam and Marzieh are aware that their Christian family worldwide is praying for them. They are very encouraged that they are not voiceless and have not been forgotten. They say: **"Thank you for praying for us. We are humbled and strengthened by your prayers and we are determined to remain faithful to Jesus even unto death."** (Elam Ministries)



PRAISE GOD... for the encouragement of the latest court hearing and pray that Maryam and Marzieh will be freed soon.

Maher El-Gohary and daughter, Dina, prevented from leaving Egypt

Maher El-Gohary and his 15-year-old daughter, Dina, have been prevented twice from leaving Egypt in recent weeks.

Maher is a BMB (Believer from a Muslim Background) having become a Christian 35 years ago. In August 2008, he filed a court case to replace the word "Muslim" on his identity papers with "Christian". In making the application, Maher was also thinking about Dina. She has been brought up as a Christian but when she turns 16 will be issued with an identity card showing her religion as Muslim. Maher lost his case in June despite being the first person to obtain a conversion certificate from a Coptic priest.

Maher was detained at Cairo Airport on 17 September. His passport was confiscated and he was advised that he is barred from travelling on orders from a 'higher authority'.

Five days later, Maher and Dina were again prevented from leaving Cairo Airport. **"I had to make sure that I was really barred from travelling, because I was told nothing officially,"** Maher said.

Maher and Dina have been living in hiding for the past year since he filed his court case. **"I really don't know where to go, now that our location has been revealed."**



"I feel so sorry for my daughter, such a young girl staying at home all the time," he said. **"They will never let us leave and they will never have mercy on us. Our only chance of getting out of the country is by obtaining a foreign passport."**

Portraying their dire situation Maher said: **"If we forge our documents we are imprisoned, if we file a lawsuit we lose the case and they persecute us. What should we do?"**

(Assyrian International News Agency)



PRAY ... that the Lord will protect and encourage Maher and Dina and provide a way out for them and for others in similar situations.

Further delays in release of *The Innocent of Acteal* prisoners

In mid-August, twenty of *The Innocent of Acteal* prisoners (including the seven men pictured) were released by order of the Mexican Supreme Court. No further prisoners have since been freed despite the Supreme Court ruling that a further 35 prisoners should be released.



The Court found that their convictions were unsound. The men had already been in prison for over eleven years on charges of participating in the Acteal "massacre" in December 1997.

Lawyers for the men believe that further releases may be delayed until November or December.

The future of those men who have been released is very uncertain. They are living in rented accommodation provided by the Chiapas state government in Tuxtla Gutierrez (over 100km away from their homes) while they await resettlement on land that state authorities have promised them. They still do not have their official prison release papers, nor do they have any form of identification. Government officials insist that the Acteal prisoners must relocate to new communities because they fear violent clashes will flare between them and their old rivals. These fears have been generated by threats made against the men who have stated that they have no desire for revenge or conflict. *(Local sources + Compass Direct)*

Church in Chains has written again to the Mexican Embassy in Dublin expressing alarm that the decision of the Supreme Court to release the prisoners is being frustrated.



PRAY...that the decision of the Supreme Court will be respected and that the other 35 men authorised for release will be freed.



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