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Pakistani court grants bail to girl, 11, accused of blasphemy

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VATICAN CITY -- The Pakistani Christian girl accused of blasphemy was granted bail Friday after three weeks in police custody.

The judge, who ordered the girl's release on a bail of about $5,282, said there was insufficient evidence to justify continuing to hold Rimsha Masih in jail. However, the case against her was not dismissed.

Investigations continue both into accusations that Rimsha burned pages of the Quran -- a violation of Pakistan's anti-blasphemy laws -- as well as into the actions of Khalid Jadoon Chishti, a Muslim cleric, who was taken into police custody Sept. 2 after being accused of planting the pages of the Quran and burned pieces of paper in the girl's bag.

Rimsha had been in police custody since Aug. 18. Her parents said she is 11 years old and has Down syndrome; a court-appointed physician reported she was about 14 and is developmentally delayed.

Peter Jacob, executive secretary of the Pakistani bishops' National Commission for Justice and Peace, told Vatican Radio the bail was high for Pakistan and certainly beyond the means of Rimsha's family, but donations were expected to cover it. The girl was released Sunday.

Granting bail was "not a charitable gesture" on the part of the court, he said, and the simple fact that "for three weeks a child was kept in custody" raised questions about the Pakistani justice system.

However, he said, the case has led to more calls, including from mainstream Muslim clerics and scholars, to at least add "safeguards against the abuse of the blasphemy laws."

"It's a big achievement and will boost public trust in the judiciary of this country. This is the first time a false accuser has been arrested. We thank clerics, media and the nation for supporting the cause," her lawyer Tahir Naveed Chaudhry said after the court hearing.

However, the central executive committee member of the All Pakistan Minority Alliance, a Christian political party, said there were still fears for Rimsha's safety.

"An accused usually leaves the city after being charged with such serious allegations (especially ones) which deal with religious sentiments," he said.

"Even judges and lawyers face threats. Likewise we shall move the family to a safe location."

Church leaders and human rights organizations have long said Pakistan's anti-blasphemy law has been abused to persecute Christians and even to settle personal disputes.

The case has sparked international condemnation of a country whose anti-blasphemy laws remain among the strictest in the world. Those found guilty can be sentenced to death.

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