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PAKISTAN | Men Acquitted of Murdering Christian Couple

On March 24, an anti-terrorism court in Lahore, Pakistan, acquitted 20 men accused in the murder of Christian couple, Shama and Shezad Masih, who were burned to death by a mob in November 2014.

Shama and Shezad Masih worked as bonded laborers in a brick kiln in Kot Radha Kishan, Kasur district in Punjab province. The couple were attacked and killed by a mob in November 2014 after Mrs. Masih was falsely accused of blasphemy for allegedly burning pages of the Qur'an. In May 2015, the anti-terrorism court charged 106 suspects in the lynching of the couple. Thirteen men were sentenced on Nov. 23, 2016 for their involvement in the killing.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's (CSW's) Chief Executive, Mervyn Thomas said, "Our prayers remain with the family of Shama and Shezad Masih, who will be disappointed with the latest acquittals. Although there were earlier convictions in this case, it is telling that the majority of perpetrators remain at large. CSW urges the government to ensure that this couple's killers are brought to justice and to introduce procedural amendments to prevent the misapplication of the blasphemy laws and to avert related incidents of mob violence."

There is an atmosphere of impunity surrounding violence against the Christian community in Pakistan, such as the burning of over 100 homes in Joseph Colony, Lahore in 2013. In January, the anti-terrorism court acquitted 115 people implicated in that attack.

Blasphemy in Pakistan is a highly sensitive issue, and the laws are widely misused to make false accusations against religious minorities, often due to personal enmity, land disputes and business or financial rivalry. Although the majority of accusations are filed against Muslims, a disproportionate number of religious minorities are affected which endangers the accused, their family and the wider community.

Misuse of the blasphemy laws has created an environment in which some people take the law into their own hands and in a number of cases this has led to mob violence, as in the case of Shama and Shezad Masih or Mashal Khan, a university student who was shot and beaten to death April 13, 2017 by a mob, including staff and other students, after a false blasphemy allegation. Pakistan's National Commission for Human Rights has called on the government to review the blasphemy legislation to bring it in line with international human rights obligations.