



Statement on recent human rights breaches arising out of blasphemy legislation in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan

The Commonwealth Lawyers Association (CLA) and the **Bar Human Rights Committee (BHRC)** refer to their previous statements issued in relation to Pakistan on 21 April 2011, 12 September 2011 and 25 October 2011. In those statements, concern was expressed as to the atmosphere of fear and intimidation surrounding the blasphemy laws in Pakistan.

Regrettably, three recent events represent a further deterioration in this situation:

On 7 May 2014, Rashid Rehman, a Supreme Court lawyer who was defending a university lecturer accused of blasphemy, was murdered in his office in Multan, Punjab by two unidentified gunmen. Two of his colleagues were also injured. Several weeks earlier, Mr Rehman had been threatened with “dire consequences” for defending Junaid Hafeez who had allegedly published blasphemous statements via Facebook.

On the same day, but in an apparently unconnected incident, lawyers from Pakistan’s Shiite minority in Jhang, Punjab protested against a senior police officer who was alleged to have detained and beaten a lawyer following a disagreement. The lawyers shouted insults at the police officer referring to him by his first name, a common name in Pakistan which is also shared by a companion to Prophet Muhammed. A few days later, a complaint was lodged against 8 named lawyers with 60 others referred to but unidentified, accusing them under the blasphemy legislation of insulting a companion to the Prophet. The accusation is strongly denied by the Muhammad Afzal Sial, President of the local bar association, who said “*Our lawyers only named the police officer, but certain elements tried to exploit the situation*”. No arrests have been made, but accusations of blasphemy often result in the persecution or murder of those who are named.

Two days later on Friday 9 May 2014, a teenager walked into Sharaqpur police station, in Punjab and gunned down Khalil Ahmed, who was in custody on charges of blasphemy. Mr Ahmed was from the Ahmadi sect and had recently asked a local shopkeeper to remove inflammatory stickers which denounced the Ahmadi community. The shopkeeper filed charges of blasphemy against Mr Ahmed and three other men which resulted in their arrest and subsequently Mr Ahmed’s death in custody.

These events occur at a time when the trial of those alleged to have killed Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti in March 2011 (due to his role in attempting to protect those falsely accused of blasphemy) is being afflicted by issues of witness intimidation.

The CLA and the BHRC are concerned that these incidents highlight the increasing threat of violence to those accused of blasphemy and their lawyers. Furthermore, it is noted that blasphemy laws have been used to persecute minority groups and settle personal disputes.



The CLA and BHRC express their grave concern at these events, and continue to urge the Government of Pakistan

- to carefully scrutinise the operation of the blasphemy laws; and
- to undertake a detailed assessment of the need for their abolition or reform; and
- to take urgent steps to protect those at risk of vigilante violence due to blasphemy issues; and
- to fully investigate and fairly prosecute all persons involved in the recent spate of killings.

**Commonwealth Lawyers Association
Bar Human Rights Committee
19 May 2014**

NOTE TO EDITORS:

The **Commonwealth Lawyer's Association** is an international organisation which exists to promote and maintain the rule of law throughout the Commonwealth by ensuring that an independent and efficient legal profession, with the highest standards of ethics and integrity, serves the people of the Commonwealth. www.commonwealthlawyers.com

The **Bar Human Rights Committee** is the international human rights arm of the Bar of England and Wales. It is an independent body concerned with defending the rule of law and internationally recognised legal standards relating to human rights and the right to a fair trial. For more information please contact BHRC in London, UK, on email: bhrc@compuserve.com.