

Bishop says Pakistani woman acquitted of blasphemy will live in Canada

TORONTO (CNS) – Asia Bibi, the Catholic woman who spent eight years on death row in Pakistan, will be welcomed to a small town in Canada, where she will be reunited with her two teenage daughters, along with the family who aided and protected her daughters in Lahore while the mother sat in jail through years of legal appeals.

The location of Bibi's daughters and their family friends must remain secret for now, a Canadian bishop who has worked on bringing Bibi to Canada told The Catholic Register, Canadian Catholic weekly.

"It's real life and death stuff," said the bishop. "There is a possibility that a militant Islamic group could come after her here."

On Jan. 29, the Supreme Court of Pakistan rejected a final attempt to have Asia Bibi retried on blasphemy charges that stem from a 2009 argument between Bibi and fellow farm workers, who accused her of drinking from the same cup as her Muslim co-workers. Under Pakistani law, insulting the prophet Muhammad is a capital offense.

With news of the Pakistani court's decision, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau revealed Canada has offered asylum to Bibi and her husband, Ashiq Masih, and that the offer has been accepted.

Bibi and Masih's daughters, who are 18 and 19 years old, have been in Canada since just before Christmas, family friend Nadeem Bhatti told The Catholic Register.

Bhatti helped bring Bibi's daughters and the family of six who befriended and helped Bibi's daughters and husband in Lahore to Canada. The Lahore family's close association with Bibi put them in danger after Pakistan's top court initially found no case against Bibi in October.

The church will extend whatever aid it can to Bibi and her family.

"We would host them in a minute," said the bishop. "So far we haven't been asked that."

If Bibi chooses to assume a new identity and establish a life for her family in an undisclosed location, media should give her that opportunity, the bishop said. The bishop asked to remain anonymous so that would-be assassins could not begin looking for Bibi in his diocese.

In the two months after the Pakistani court made its ruling public on Oct. 31, Bibi's daughters and their family friends moved three times to various secret locations in Pakistan, while followers of Khadim Hussain Rizvi searched house-to-house, looking to kill them.

Rizvi's party, Tehreek-e-Labbaik, had challenged the October acquittal.

Following the Oct. 31 announcement that Pakistan's Supreme Court had acquitted Bibi, Rizvi announced a fatwa that put a price on the heads of the judges who heard the case, various government ministers and Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Pakistani police and security forces arrested up to 3,000 militants in an effort to protect Bibi, Bhatti said. The atmosphere was so charged and so dangerous Bibi's daughters and friends needed immediate sanctuary in December, Bhatti told The Catholic Register.