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USCIRF today welcomes a Pakistani court's decision to drop all charges against Rimsha Masih, a young Christian girl accused of blasphemy, and applauds the successful efforts of Paul Bhatti, the Adviser on National Harmony to the Pakistani Prime Minister. The Islamabad High Court reportedly dropped the charges because there were no witnesses who had seen her burning pages of the Qur'an. The Zardari government now has an opportunity to build on this positive outcome and address the culture of impunity and intolerance that is plaguing Pakistan.

"We are encouraged by the court's actions that highlight the importance of the rule of law and sends an encouraging signal that this law should not be abused," said Katrina Lantos Swett, USCIRF's Chair. "Now it is important to ensure the safety of Rimsha and her family since mobs often take the law into their own hands when blasphemy allegations are made." Accusers often use the blasphemy law to abuse religious freedom, carry out vendettas, or gain an advantage over others in land or business disputes or in other matters completely unrelated to blasphemy.

"Despite the positive outcome of this case, Rimsha's experience signals the need for Pakistan to reform or repeal its harsh blasphemy law that carries the death penalty, requires neither proof of intent nor evidence to be presented after allegations are made, and includes no penalties for false allegations," continued Lantos Swett. At least 16 people currently are on death row for blasphemy, an estimated 20 others are serving life sentences, and many more people are

awaiting trial or have appealed their sentences.

The blasphemy law fuels violence and religious extremism that threatens the freedoms of religion and expression and other human rights for everyone in Pakistan, particularly women, members of religious minorities, and those in the majority Muslim community who hold views deemed “un-Islamic” by extremists. This extremism also threatens Pakistan’s security and stability. In light of the particularly severe violations of religious freedom in Pakistan, USCIRF has recommended since 2002 that the State Department designate Pakistan a “country of particular concern”, or CPC.

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