



## Pakistan



This needy Pakistani family benefits from Barnabas Fund's feeding programme

Rimsha Masih's life was torn apart when she was falsely accused of blasphemy, beaten and arrested in August 2012. Rimsha, who is 14 and thought to have a lower mental age, was accused of desecrating the Quran, a crime that carries a sentence of life imprisonment in Pakistan. Although Rimsha's case was dismissed in November 2012 after evidence came to light that she was framed, she remains in severe danger of attack by vigilantes.

Christians are particularly at risk under Pakistan's "blasphemy laws", which are often misused against people of all religions to settle personal scores. Christian women and girls in Pakistan are also vulnerable to being kidnapped and sexually abused. A 13-year-old Christian girl was kidnapped, drugged and gang-raped by three men in June 2012. Police sided with her attackers, and members of her family were beaten in an attempt to force them to withdraw their complaint. Victims may also be forced to convert to Islam and marry their Muslim abductors. It is estimated that 700 cases of this outrage, which is used by some Muslims as a means of spreading Islam,

occur every year, and the authorities do little to prevent it.

Tradition traces the beginnings of Christianity in Pakistan to the mission work of the apostle Thomas, and some churches in Ancient India have a long history. The subsequent Islamic conquest eliminated Christianity in the region for several hundred years. A significant Christian population has grown, however, over the last couple of centuries and is now 5 million strong. In 1956 Pakistan, which is 95% Muslim, became an Islamic Republic and since 1991 policy has increasingly been influenced by an Islamist minority. Sharia law has a significant place in public life.

Pakistani Christians often live in grinding poverty, with many working as labourers or in brick factories, where they are often "bonded labourers", which is almost the same as being slaves. Christians often find it difficult to get jobs owing to discrimination, and their resulting poverty can mean their children are unable to have an education. Many Christian families remain trapped in crushing cycles of poverty and illiteracy.

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