

Asia Bibi: Protests delay release of Christian woman accused of blasphemy in Pakistan

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The release of a Pakistani Christian woman who was acquitted eight years after being sentenced to death for blasphemy has been delayed.

Her release was delayed following protests by radical Islamists, who want her publicly hanged, and failed talks between them and the government.



A lawyer representing a local cleric who had raised the initial blasphemy charges against Ms Bibi petitioned the supreme court on Thursday to reverse its acquittal.

Her husband, Ashiq Masih, returned from Britain with their children in mid-October and was waiting for her release so they could leave Pakistan.

France and Spain have offered her asylum, while the former bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir-Ali, who is a Christian born in Pakistan, said Ms Bibi should be granted asylum in the UK. *We take undoubted jihadists – so I'd be happy with a faithful and brave Christian family.*

It (*her acquittal*) prompted over 2,000 Islamists to block a key road linking the capital, Islamabad, with the garrison city of Rawalpindi, causing traffic jams. Hundreds also blocked another key motorway linking Islamabad with other major cities. Other protesters damaged or set fire to dozens of vehicles to pressure the government to prevent Ms Bibi's release. Demonstrations are also being held in Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar and Multan – and clashes with police have been reported.

Afzal Qadri urged supporters to kill the three judges who acquitted Ms Bibi, revolt against army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa and overthrow Mr Khan's government. Islamists were to hold nationwide rallies after Friday's prayers, stoking fears of violence.

Schools and colleges have been closed after radical cleric Khadim Hussain Rizvi, the leader of Tehreek-e-Labbaik party, announced that "talks" between his deputies and the government about Ms Bibi's fate had failed.

"We are ready to die to show our love for the prophet," he told an emotionally charged rally in Lahore.

Mr Rizvi's envoys wanted Ms Bibi barred from leaving the

country, but information minister Fawad Chaudhry rejected the demand and said the government would not be dictated to.

This could result further delay Ms Bibi's release. Security has been stepped up near the facility where Ms Bibi is being held, authorities said.

Pakistan's new Prime Minister Imran Khan, who came to power this summer partly by pursuing the Islamist agenda... asked protesters not to "test the patience of the state".

Bibi remained at an undisclosed location on Thursday, where the 54-year-old mother of five was being held for security reasons, awaiting her formal release, her brother James Masih told The Associated Press. Masih said his sister simply would not be safe in Pakistan. "She has no other option and she will leave the country soon," he said.

Masih would not disclose the country of her destination but both France and Spain have offered asylum.

Also on Thursday, jail officials said two inmates were arrested last month at an undisclosed detention facility for planning to kill Bibi by strangling her. They said the men were still being questioned.