

Pakistan 'blasphemy' girl Rimsha Masih moves to Canada

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A Pakistani Christian girl Rimsha Masih who was arrested for alleged blasphemy last year and forced into hiding for fear of her life has moved to Canada, an activist said today.

Rimsha Masih could have faced life in prison if convicted over allegations that she set fire to pages of the Koran in the poor, run-down neighbourhood where she lived on the edge of Islamabad.

She was arrested last August and spent three weeks on remand in one of Pakistan's toughest jails in a case that drew widespread international condemnation.

She was released on bail and the case against her was quashed in November, but she and her family were forced into hiding, living under government protection in fear of their lives.

But a Christian activist in Pakistan told AFP today that Rimsha and her close relatives had moved to Canada.

"Rimsha and her family have arrived in Canada," Sajid Ishaq said.

"The Canadian government is supporting them. They are presently doing a foundation course to learn basic English," he said.

Basharat Masih, a Pakistani policeman who said he had been assigned to Rimsha's protection, also confirmed that they had left.

"They are being taken care of by the Canadian government and attending church services," he told AFP.

Blasphemy is an extremely sensitive issue in Pakistan, where 97 percent of

the population are Muslims.

Insulting the Prophet Mohammed can be punished by death.

Even unproven allegations can provoke a violent public response and activists say the legislation is often used to settle personal disputes.

Local media said Rimsha was as young as 11, but an official medical report classified her as "uneducated" and 14 years old, but with a mental age younger than her years.

Pakistani Christian leaders last year paid tribute to Muslim clerics, members of the media and civil society for highlighting the injustice done to Rimsha.

Cleric Hafiz Mohammed Khalid Chishti has been accused of desecrating the Koran and tampering with the evidence against her.