

Chief Minister, Punjab Usman Buzdar
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Dear Chief Minister Buzdar,

I write to you to draw your attention to the case of Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar, a Christian couple who were convicted of "blasphemy" and sentenced to death in 2014 for allegedly sending "blasphemous" text messages to a mosque cleric. They have been in prison for the better part of eight years waiting for their appeal hearing, when they should not be in jail in the first place.

Shafqat and Shagufta have denied all allegations and are waiting to appeal their sentences in the Lahore High Court.

Pakistan's blasphemy laws violate the country's human rights obligations, both in their substance and their application, to respect and protect the rights to life; freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief; freedom of opinion and expression; equality before the law; and the prohibition of discrimination, and the right to life. The laws do not meet human rights law and standards and lack essential safeguards to minimise the risk of additional violations and abuses and are emblematic of the dangers faced by the country's religious minorities.

I find it highly distressing that, under Pakistani law, the death penalty is the mandatory punishment for those convicted of blasphemy under Section 295-C. As I am sure you are aware, the UN Human Rights Committee has stated that the automatic and mandatory imposition of the death penalty, constitutes an arbitrary deprivation of life in violation of Article 6(1) of the ICCPR.275.

Chief Minister Buzdar, I strongly urge you to ensure that Shafqat and Shagufta are immediately and unconditionally released and that they and their lawyers are provided with adequate security upon their release. Pakistan's blasphemy laws will continue to endanger religious minorities and put lives at risk if they are not repealed.

Yours sincerely,