

Christians: Pakistani Catholic charged with blasphemy was murdered

LAHORE, Pakistan – Pakistani Christians said a Catholic businessman imprisoned for life for blasphemy was tortured and murdered and did not die of a heart attack as stated in a medical report.

The man was found dead in his prison cell.

“Qamar David might have fallen prey to an active hate campaign going on in the country on this issue by extremist groups,” the Catholic bishops’ national commission for justice and peace said in an update circulated by e-mail March 15, the day David, 55, died in “mysterious circumstances” in a jail in Karachi.

The Asian church news agency UCA News reported that Auxiliary Bishop Sebastian Shah of Lahore celebrated David’s funeral March 17 at St. Joseph Church in Lahore. Women wailed as the coffin was placed in front of the altar. The Mass remained tense as relatives scuffled with Catholic media and justice and peace workers documenting the funeral.

Father Andrew Nisari asked the congregation of more than 200 to be undeterred in their faith.

“Another historic chapter has been added in our struggle against the fatal logic,” said the priest, referring to the blasphemy laws. “The persecution and discrimination, especially in finding jobs,” has frustrated young people, he added.

David, a wealthy businessman, was arrested in 2006 for being in possession of a SIM phone used for sending derogatory messages insulting the Prophet Mohammed. Though a Muslim also accused was acquitted for lack of evidence, in 2010 the Catholic was given life imprisonment and fined 101,000 rupees (\$1,200) under the blasphemy laws.

Clergy, church activists and the family of the victim have slammed the initial findings of the doctors.

David's lawyer, Pervez Chaudhry, maintained that the allegations were spurious, triggered by a business rivalry, and that the conviction was the result of pressure from local religious clerics and their supporters.

The incident is the latest in a series of blasphemy-related killings. Prayers are still being held around the country for Shahbaz Bhatti, the federal Cabinet minister assassinated earlier this month for trying to amend the blasphemy laws.

The blasphemy laws give life imprisonment and the death penalty to those convicted of insulting the Quran and Prophet Mohammed, respectively. Church groups, who condemned these laws for decades, have adopted a low profile in the wake of recent killings.