

Asia Bibi's former neighbours still want her put to death

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'She confessed... how can we forgive her?'

There is little sign among Mohammad Idris' rows of lemon trees that his field once saw an incident which would convulse Pakistan.

Â The canal-side land outside the village of Ittan Wali in rural Punjab is silent apart from the odd passing cart and the faint chatter of nearby farm labourers.

Â A decade ago it was an argument among such female labourers that suddenly flared into an accusation of blasphemy and set in train bloody events that are still unresolved.

Â The accusation against a Christian mother-of-five called Asia Bibi and the death sentence that followed divided Pakistan and prompted religious extremists to assassinate two senior politicians who spoke out for her.

Â The 54-year-old was in October acquitted on appeal, but remains in protective custody until the ruling has been reviewed. She is widely expected to be freed to flee to the West and claim asylum.

Â Pakistan's supreme court demolished her conviction saying it was fatally undermined by procedural problems, contradictory testimony from her accusers and an apparently forced confession.

An undated file photo of Asia Bibi Credit: AFP

But even settling her abroad is not without complications. Wary of a reaction from Britain's Muslim community, prime minister Theresa May reportedly shrugged off the pleas of cabinet ministers that the UK step forward and offer a route to safety. Australia, the US or Canada are likely alternatives.

Â Yet in Ittan Wali, where it all began, time has not mellowed the villagers accusations and there is no forgiveness for a woman who spent eight years on death row.

â€œShe confessed her crime in front of them, how can they forgive her?â€• asked Mohammad Bota, the 50-year-old elder brother of Mohammad Idris.

Villagers the Telegraph spoke to in Ittan Wali were open, hospitable and insisted their village was not backward. But they were also uncompromising when it came to the former neighbour who had lived in a small house with a blue painted gate.

All maintained that Asia Bibi had confessed to insulting the Prophet Mohammed during a quarrel with Muslim co-workers and her conviction should stand. If Pakistan's harsh anti-blasphemy laws decree it, she should hang, they said.

“I would die in the name of my religion and if someone has committed blasphemy, then they are not forgiven,” said Shawkat Ali, a 62-year-old farmer. “If the supreme court has some faith in religion and if they are Muslims, they should execute her.”

Asia Bibi's torment began in June 2009, in the field that was at the time planted with falsa bushes rather than lemon trees.

The gate to Asia Bibi's old house in the village of Ittan Wali. It has now been sold to a Muslim family. Credit: Ben Farmer

The two sides disagree on what is alleged to have happened as Muslim and Christian farmhands worked alongside each other that day harvesting berries, but agree there was a dispute when two women refused to use a drinking water vessel Ms Bibi had used. The dispute became a bitter exchange in which Ms Bibi is alleged to have defamed the Prophet.

Mr Idris, who was elsewhere in the field at the time, says when it became clear his workers were having a religious argument, he sent them home immediately and told them never to return. But the matter was not done.

The Muslim women complained to a local cleric, Qari Muhammad Salam, and a couple of days later, Ms Bibi was summoned before the village to explain herself. It is at this meeting the villagers say she confessed and sealed her fate.

The police were called and Pakistan's harsh blasphemy laws swung into action. Yet Ms Bibi denied blasphemy and said that far from being summoned, she was in fact dragged through the streets by a mob and beaten almost senseless.

The supreme court agreed that the confession was not voluntary “and nor it can be relied upon to form the basis of a conviction, especially for capital punishment”.

The court also pointed out that Mrs Bibi's accusers had at first not mentioned any argument with her and that of 25 women in the field only two had made the blasphemy accusation.

The supreme court's ruling was “every disappointing” Qari Salam told the Telegraph. “We believe that our case was on merit and she deserves the death sentence according to the law.”

Qari Salam, the local cleric who first brought a blasphemy case against Asia Bibi Credit: Ben Farmer

“Many women of the village, when they heard about this judgment, they were in shock. This is how strongly people feel, because this incident was so strong and so clear and in front of so many people.”

The supreme court's decision was met with outcry from religious hardliners across Pakistan, who brought the country to a halt in protest. Roads and highways were blocked until Imran Khan's government agreed to allow a petition to review the decision and promised that in the meantime Mrs Bibi would stay in Pakistan.

Weeks after her release, the aftershocks were still being felt in Ittan Wali. The day after the verdict, villagers had

intended to protest but found Ittan Wali surrounded by police. The blockade lasted eight days they claim. After clashes in nearby villages in which officers were attacked, police began investigating hundreds of residents.

Scores of them now leave the mud streets of Ittan Wali each night to sleep in their fields in case of police raids. A police spokesman confirmed there was a case against 700 people from nearby villages, including more than 100 from Ittan Wali, for attacking officers and burning a van.

Mohammad Bota said the people of Ittan Wali were innocent and blamed other villages for the violence.

Mohammad Idris (left) the landlord who employed Asia Bibi on his land, and his older brother, Mohammad Bota (right) is a local teacher Credit: Ben Farmer

“It's been a very hard time and even until today, many people in the village are sleeping outside because they fear the police will crackdown,” he said.

The simple one room house where Asia Bibi lived with her husband and five children still stands in the village. It has now been sold on to a Muslim family, and in the shared yard, goats are tethered and rabbits hop around.

Mohammad Bota said Christians remained welcome in the village and said Ms Bibi's relatives had not been molested after her trial. But after the assassination of Salmar Taseer, Punjab's governor, and minorities minister Shahbaz Bhatti for speaking on her behalf, Ms Bibi and her family say they can no longer live in Pakistan.

A UK Christian group helping the family said in November that her family are being sought door-to-door by vigilantes.

The villagers confess that they sometimes wonder whether they wish none of this had ever have happened.

“This case has given an enormous loss to this country, so many people have been killed and peace has been disrupted,” said Mr Bota.

But he went on: “If she had not uttered these remarks, then things then things would not have turned out this way.”

For Qari Salam, there can be no forgiveness.

“If you start forgiving people on this issue, then it will become routine that people will commit blasphemy and just ask for forgiveness.

“We wish that if she had not uttered such remarks, and she had been living like before it would have been peaceful. But if someone says this, then there's no compromise on the dignity of the Prophet Mohammed. Being Muslim, we believe that these are testing times and we should be ready for them.”

- The Telegraph