



To: **Mr. Heiner Bielefeldt**
Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

cc. Independent Expert on Minority Issues
Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, its causes and consequences
Working Group on Discrimination Against Women in Law and Practice

Geneva, 29 July 2011

Franciscans International (FI) expresses its serious concern about the kidnapping of Ms. Farah Hatim, 24, who has been forced into marriage and converted to Islam, in Rahim Yar Khan, Southern Punjab (Pakistan).

FI has received reliable information reporting that Ms. Farah Hatim, a nursing student and a resident of the city of Rahi Yar Khan (between Lahore and Mulan), in Southern Punjab, was kidnapped on 8 May 2011 by Mr. Zeehan Iliyas, a Muslim clerk. Mr. Iliyas aimed to convert her to Islam and marry her. She has been threatened, beaten and tortured, and forced to sign a declaration stating that she has freely converted to Islam.

The family members of Ms. Hatim reported the case to the Christian community and human rights organization which immediately staged a public protest in front of the local police station. Despite the proof that Ms. Hatim bears signs of beatings and injuries, Judge Khurshid Shah - who was called to settle the chaos - has ignored the situation. The Christian community of Punjab has invoked the intervention of the Federal Ministry to raise awareness about the widespread phenomenon and to address this specific case.

Franciscans International is seriously concerned about the failure of the Government of Pakistan, as a member of the United Nations and a member of the Human Rights Council, to protect the right of Ms. Farah Hatim, a Pakistani citizen, to enjoy her right of Freedom of Religion or Belief, as stipulated by International Law.

The following events have been reported:

- Farah Hatim is a 24 year old student nurse at the Shiekh Zaid Medical College in Rahim Yar Khan, Southern Punjab, Pakistan.
- On 8 May 2011, Farah was kidnapped while she was at school. Even her identification documents were handed over to the culprits by the school authorities. The alleged culprits involved in the abduction were identified and their names were included in the legal files submitted to the Court. According to the information received one of the persons responsible for the kidnapping – who was

reported to be Mr. Zeehan Iliyas, a Muslim bank clerk - forced Farah to convert to Islam and afterwards forced her to marry him.

- According to the information gathered from Farah's family, Mr. Zeehan Iliyas repeatedly threatened Farah with conversion to Islam and forced marriage, well before the abduction.
- Immediately after the kidnapping, Farah's mother – Ms. Balquees Marriam – went to the local Police station to report the event and to file a First Information Report (FIR). The Police officers suggested that she give up and they refused to intervene, with the justification that nothing could be done to change the course of the events.
- Farah's family then requested the intervention of Mr. Kamran Micheal, the provincial minister for human rights and minority affairs in the Province of Punjab. However, only after strong protests of the local Christian population, Farah's mother was eventually able to file a FIR (N. 150/2011) against the perpetrators.
- Immediately following this, Farah's family started to be threatened by the Police and the perpetrators of the kidnapping, to convince them to drop the case.
- During the investigations conducted by the Police, Farah was not formally questioned nor was she able to communicate with her family or the outside world. It was also reported that Zeehan Iliyas and his family administered drugs to Farah and kept her isolated under the control of Mr. Iliyas and his family.
- From their part, Farah's family was forced to leave Rahim Yar Khan, in order to protect themselves from the constant threats they received. They are now hosted and provided with assistance by the association "All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA)," in Islamabad.
- The same association at first attempted to mediate between Farah's family and her kidnapers, but without positive results. In addition, the attempt to arrange a private meeting between Farah and her family to check her physical and mental condition was not successful.
- The APMA's lawyers consequently decided to resort to the Court of First Instance in Rahim Yar Khan, to ask for a hearing where Farah, her family of origin, and her new Muslim family could be confronted. At the date of the scheduled hearing, on 4 July 2011, Farah and the Muslim family did not appear in front of the judge. The latter, reportedly, invited Farah's family to withdraw the complaint.
- As a last resort Farah's family decided to appeal to the High Court, in Multan. On 20 July 2011, Farah, her new Muslim family, and her family of origin appeared in front of the Court for a confrontation.
- Farah was asked to choose with which family she wanted to live, henceforth and Farah chose her new Muslim family. After the hearing, Farah and her family of origin had a brief private meeting where Farah, exhausted, admitted it was too late for her to go back to her old family and life.

Farah Hatim is just one of the over 700 Christian women that every year, in Pakistan, are kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam.

Recommendations

Franciscans International calls upon the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the International community at large to:

- Ask the local government to adopt all necessary measures to ensure Farah's personal safety and liberty. That is securing her in a shelter where she can physically and mentally recover from the abduction and physical and psychological stress, and express her free will again.
- Ask the local government to investigate the circumstances under which Farah has been kidnapped and kept in segregation, and to prosecute the culprits.
- Ask the local and the central government of Pakistan to set up an independent and genuine inquiry committee to ascertain the independence of the judiciary that handled the case of Farah Hatim.
- Ask the government of Pakistan to immediately inquire into the other cases related to the widespread custom of kidnapping young Christian girls to be converted to Islam and forced into marriage.
- Ask the government of Pakistan to adopt and implement adequate measures to eliminate this one as well as all other forms of violence perpetrated against Pakistani women belonging to religious minorities.
- Ask the government of Pakistan to commit to refuting the provisions on discrimination on the basis of religion included in its Constitution, national laws, and state policies.
- Encourage the government to invite the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Independent Expert on Minority Issues to visit Pakistan in a joint mission and to assess the situation.

Should you require further information, please contact **Ms. Francesca Restifo, International Advocacy Director:** f.restifo@fiop.org.

Thank you in advance for your attention.

Sincerely,



Sr. Denise Boyle, fmdm
Executive Director