

Aasia Bibi freed from Multan jail, flown to Islamabad

RAWALPINDI: After her release from Multan's women prison in the light of the Oct 31 Supreme Court verdict overturning her conviction and death sentence, Aasia Bibi was brought to Islamabad onboard a special aircraft on Wednesday night, Dawn learnt through reliable sources.

The aircraft carrying Aasia Bibi, whose acquittal of blasphemy charge sparked countrywide protests by religious parties and groups, landed at the old Benazir Bhutto International Airport of Islamabad adjacent to Nur Khan Air Base.

Soon after her landing, she was taken to an undisclosed place in Islamabad amid tight security. The authorities were keeping her movement and whereabouts secret for security reasons.

Authorities concerned were also tightlipped about her future plan and it was unclear if she would be kept in Islamabad or would be allowed to fly out of the country.

On Tuesday, Italy stated it would help Aasia leave Pakistan because her life was in danger in the country following charges of blasphemy that put her on death row for eight years.

Her husband Ashiq Masih has reportedly stated that they could be killed by those opposing her acquittal. The authorities previously said they may bar the Christian woman from travelling abroad as a review petition against her acquittal had already been filed.

Earlier, the international Catholic agency Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) had quoted Ashiq Masih as saying in a telephone call: "I appeal to the Italian government to help me and my family leave Pakistan. We are extremely worried because our lives are in danger. We don't even have enough to eat because

we can't go out to buy food."

Aasia's case has prompted groups such as ACN, which has close ties to the Vatican, to demand protection for Christians in countries where they are a minority.

Soon after the Supreme Court's verdict, the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) blocked roads in major cities of the country for three days, condemning the judges who had acquitted Aasia Bibi, the prime minister and the army chief.

The TLP called off the protests after striking a deal with the government under which it could bar Aasia from leaving the country.

Aasia's lawyer Saiful Mulook fled to the Netherlands a couple of days ago because of fears for his safety.

In a message sent to AFP soon after she was freed, Mr Mulook said: "I have been told that she is on a plane but nobody knows where she will land."