

Visa service at Netherlands embassy resumes

ISLAMABAD: The Netherlands resumed visa and passport services in Pakistan on Monday following a brief suspension, denying that its embassy had closed over security concerns after the country gave shelter to the lawyer of a Christian woman involved in a blasphemy case.

Religious parties spearheaded by the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan blocked streets and hurled threats at judges after the Supreme Court on Oct 31 overturned the conviction of Aasia Bibi, a mother of five, who had been on death row for eight years.

Aasia's lawyer, Saiful Mulook, fled to the Netherlands soon after the verdict, citing death threats. The Dutch government said on Thursday that it had offered him temporary shelter.

On Friday, the Dutch government said in a statement that its embassy in Pakistan, which is in a tightly guarded Diplomatic Enclave, had temporarily halted issuing visas "due to circumstances beyond our control".

On Monday evening, the embassy updated the statement: "The Netherlands embassy in Pakistan has resumed all consular/visa related services".

The media earlier reported that the embassy had been forced to close because of threats. But the Dutch foreign ministry said reports of the embassy's closure were mistaken.

"The Dutch embassy in Pakistan is open," the ministry said. "I can add that we take the security of the embassy and our employees very seriously. This is also the subject of consultations between the Netherlands and Pakistan," an official at the Dutch foreign office said.

No one answered the telephone at the Dutch embassy after office hours on Monday.

Reuters