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National Assembly passes Zainab Alert Bill with majority vote

Amir Wasim | Dawn.com | Published March 11, 2020

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The National Assembly on Wednesday passed the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Bill, 2019 with a majority vote, days after the Senate had also given its approval to legislation that seeks to expedite investigation and punishment for perpetrators of child abuse.

Having received approval from both Houses of Parliament, the bill now requires the president's assent before becoming law.

The bill — named after nine-year-old Zainab Ansari, who was murdered after being raped in Kasur in 2018 — was first tabled by Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari in June last year after multiple cases of horrific crimes against children emerged, mainly from Kasur.

The incident had sparked outrage in the country and raised questions over the security of children and responsibilities of concerned authorities to prevent increasing incidents of child abuse in Pakistan.

The bill, which was first passed by the National Assembly in January this year, was approved by the Upper House last week with some amendments that included expanding the ambit of the bill, which was earlier limited to Islamabad only, to the entire country.

However, Jamaat-e-Islami's Mualana Abdul Akbar Chitrali opposed the bill claiming that members were not provided sufficient time to submit amendments.

This prompted Mazari to say his party had made no contribution towards the passage of the bill. "He did not suggest any amendment at any stage, but he is voicing his opposition when the process is about to be completed," she said.

Chitrali kept voicing his opposition, shouting "No", when the NA speaker first put up the bill for a clause by clause vote and then as a whole.

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Later, Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Ali Muhammad Khan told Chitrali he could still move amendments if he wanted to even after the bill had been passed.

Taking to Twitter, Mazari said the bill will now go to President Arif Alvi for his assent, after which it will

"Finally today Zainab Alert Bill was passed with Senate amendments by NA and will now go to President for signing into Law. It has been a long struggle which @Asad_Umar began in last NA, Has had many hiccups along the way but thank God the Bill is on its way to becoming law," she said.

Talking to *Dawn.com* last week after the bill received Senate's nod, PPP Senator Mustafa Nawaz Khokhar, who heads the Senate Functional Committee on Human Rights that reviewed the bill before it was passed, said the usual punishments defined for child abuse in the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) will apply.

Under Section 364-A of the PPC, a person who abducts a child under the age of 14 "in order that such [child] may be murdered or subjected to grievous hurt, or slavery, or to the lust of any person [...] shall be punished with death or with imprisonment for life or with rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to 14 years and shall not be less than seven years".

A helpline will also be set up to report missing children while the government will establish the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Agency (ZARRA) to issue an alert for a missing child. This agency will be led by a director general who will be appointed by the prime minister after public advertisement, according to a copy of the bill seen by *Dawn.com*.

and maintain an online database of all children reported missing or abducted with their current status.

Police will inform ZARRA about an incident of a child missing or abducted within two hours of receiving such a report and if the agency directly receives information of a child going missing or having been abducted, it will inform the relevant police station immediately.

According to the bill, upon receiving information that a child is missing, the officer in charge of the police station will reduce the same into writing in the same manner as prescribed for a cognisable offence under Section 154 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), and will be mandated to start an investigation of the case and recover the missing child.

The provisions of CrPC will apply to the proceedings carried out under the Zainab Alert bill, except in case of juvenile suspects who will be dealt with under the Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018.

But under the bill's provisions, police will be bound to register an FIR within two hours of a child being reported missing by their parents. Police officials failing to comply with this provision will be punished with imprisonment of up to two years and a fine of Rs100,000.

According to the bill, special courts will be bound to decide sexual abuse cases involving children under the

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shib

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Great..Hope the President will take out some time from his leisure and sign the bill asap...Make this bill as law...

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Salman

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Good step but much much more is needed. Motivation is needed among the people who are delegated with the sensitive task of finding such kids in time. Ashamed to see that folks in the NA would be delaying this kind of bill for any reason.

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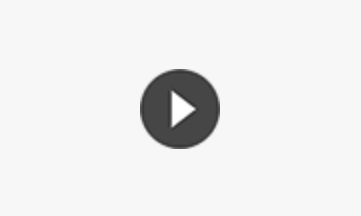
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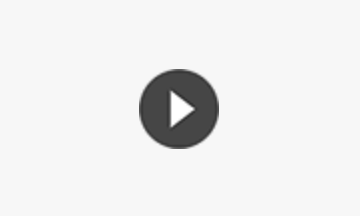
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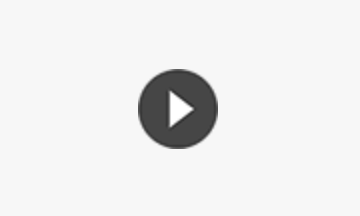
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