

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) wrote to President George W. Bush urging him to raise in his January 24 meeting with Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz the need to promote and protect religious freedom and religious tolerance in Pakistan. Since its inception, the Commission has looked closely at the conditions of religious freedom in Pakistan and continues to recommend to the Secretary of State that Pakistan be named a "country of particular concern" (CPC) for its severe violations of religious freedom. The State Department has not yet designated Pakistan a CPC.

Sectarian and religiously-motivated violence has been committed by Sunni Muslim extremist groups against Shia Muslims, Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians. Discriminatory legislation has fostered an atmosphere of religious intolerance and eroded the social and legal status of members of religious minorities, particularly the Ahmadi community. Blasphemy allegations, which are often false, result in the lengthy detention of, and sometimes violence against, Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, and members of other religious minorities, as well as Muslims on account of their religious beliefs. After Pakistan's President General Pervez Musharraf took power in a military coup in 1999, he announced early in his tenure that he would address some of these serious problems. His government has failed to do so, however, and has been criticized inside and outside Pakistan for capitulating to, and thus emboldening, militant groups that advocate policies opposed to the protection of religious freedom.

The Commission recognizes the importance of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship and the strong ties between our two countries. Nevertheless, concerns about religious freedom and other human rights are a critical element of U.S. interests in Pakistan and should be prominent on the bilateral agenda. We hope that President Bush will discuss with Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz the United States' concern about severe violations of religious freedom in Pakistan, the persistent problem of sectarian violence, and the need to promote democratic institutions and genuine religious tolerance among all religious communities.

The text of the letter to President Bush follows:

Dear President Bush:

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I urge you to raise in your meeting next week with Pakistan's Prime Minister, Mr. Shaukat Aziz, the need to promote and protect religious freedom and religious tolerance in Pakistan.

Since its inception, the Commission has looked closely at the conditions of religious freedom in Pakistan. The country's president, General Pervez Musharraf, who took power in a military coup in October 1999, announced early in his tenure that his government would address some of these serious problems. Unfortunately, his government has failed to live up to many of the expectations that it had raised. Moreover, the current government has been criticized inside and outside Pakistan for capitulating to, and thus emboldening, militant groups that advocate policies that are opposed to the protection of religious freedom for all Pakistanis and the equal citizenship of members of all religious communities. Belated efforts to curb extremism through reform of Pakistan's thousands of Islamic religious schools continue to have little effect. Many of these schools provide ongoing ideological training and motivation to those who take part in violence targeting religious minorities in Pakistan and abroad.

Sectarian and religiously-motivated violence, much of it committed against Shia Muslims by Sunni militants, is chronic in Pakistan. Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians have also been targeted by Sunni extremist groups. In the past few years, there have also been fatal attacks on churches and other Christian institutions. Last November, a mob of over 1,500 persons, incited by local Muslim clerics on the basis of a false accusation of blasphemy against a local Christian man, set fire to and destroyed several churches, schools, and homes of Christian families in the town of Sangla Hill. Political leaders did condemn the violence and the blasphemy charge was later dropped, but the incident is only one example of the violence that minority religious communities experience in Pakistan and the fear with which they must routinely live.

Discriminatory legislation has fostered an atmosphere of religious intolerance and eroded the social and legal status of members of religious minorities, particularly the Ahmadi community. Ahmadis, who number three-four million in Pakistan, are prevented by law from engaging in the full practice of their faith. Officially barred from "posing" as Muslims, it is illegal for Ahmadis to preach in public, to call their places of worship "mosques," or to produce, publish, and disseminate their religious materials. Ahmadis have been arrested and

imprisoned for terms of up to three years for such acts. They are also subject to violence; last October, eight Ahmadis were killed and 20 injured when gunmen fired on Ahmadi worshippers during Friday prayers.

Blasphemy allegations, which are often false, result in the lengthy detention of, and sometimes violence against, Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, and members of other religious minorities, as well as Muslims on account of their religious beliefs. Prescribed penalties for blasphemy include death and life imprisonment, after proceedings which frequently lack due process. Just last week, 50 members of the "Divine Love" Mehdi Foundation International community were arrested on blasphemy charges and are reportedly being subject to physical abuse while in detention. Some of those accused under the blasphemy laws have been attacked and even killed by vigilantes, including while in police custody; those who escape official punishment or vigilante attack are often forced to flee the country. Although amended in October 2004 with the aim of reducing the more maliciously applied charges, the procedural changes have not had a significant affect on the way the blasphemy laws are exploited in Pakistan.

Pakistan's Hudood Ordinances provide for harsh punishments, such as amputation and death by stoning, for violations of Islamic law. Although these extreme corporal punishments have not been carried out in practice due to high evidentiary standards, lesser punishments such as jail terms or fines have been imposed. Rape victims run a high risk of being charged with adultery, for which death by stoning remains a possible sentence. The UN Committee Against Torture, as well as the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, have stated that stoning and amputation can constitute inhuman or degrading treatment under international human rights standards and treaties.

The Commission is also concerned about the country's public school curriculum, which, according to the State Department, includes "derogatory remarks against minority religions, particularly Hindus and Jews," and the more general teaching that religious intolerance is acceptable. Moreover, there continue to be reports of incidents of persons being forcibly converted to Islam, including the case in December of last year in which three Hindu girls were reportedly kidnapped and pressed to change their religion.

In view of the severe religious freedom violations that exist in Pakistan, the Commission continues to recommend that Pakistan be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. We encourage you to urge Mr. Aziz to make serious and sustained efforts to promote and protect the religious freedom of all the citizens of Pakistan, including:

- to rescind laws that effectively criminalize the public practice of the Ahmadi faith in violation of the right to freedom of religion guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;

- to implement procedural changes to the blasphemy laws that will significantly and genuinely reduce their abuse; and

- to take effective steps to prevent sectarian violence and punish its perpetrators, including disarming militant groups and any religious schools that provide weapons and other training.

Mr. President, we recognize the importance of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship and the strong ties between our two countries. Nevertheless, concerns about religious freedom and other human rights are a critical element of U.S. interests in Pakistan and should be prominent on the bilateral agenda. We hope that Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz's visit to Washington provides an occasion for a serious discussion of severe violations of religious freedom in Pakistan, the persistent problem of sectarian violence, and the need to promote democratic institutions and genuine religious tolerance among all religious communities.

Respectfully,

Michael Cromartie
Chair

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael Cromartie
- Felice D. Gaer