Hearings on Religious Freedom in India and Pakistan: Hon. Robert Oakley Oral Testimony

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AMBASSADOR
OAKLEY: I'd like to start with a few general remarks based upon my experience around the world with the U.S. Government. Number one, I think that we make a mistake when we focus excessively upon a single issue, whether it be narcotics or terrorism or human rights or religious persecution or, in the case of India and Pakistan, nonproliferation or strategic interests, whatever. The United States around the world historically has, at times, tended to focus upon a single issue, which I think is counterproductive.

At other times, when we take a broad view of all of our interests, all of our objectives, the moral ones as well as the material and the strategic ones have have an equilibrium, I think in those cases, we do better.

Second, I think that there is a role for the U.S. Government. I think there is a role for nongovernmental organizations; for foundations; for Congress and for private business in many issues, and that applies to the religious situation in the subcontinent just as it does to others. I agree with my two colleagues who have already spoken that the U.S. Government should, in most circumstances, rely primarily upon quiet diplomacy, speaking out if there's a particularly horrendous situation but by and large, because in Pakistan, the situation is so sensitive, and in India, the institutions and the heritage is there, quiet discussion is more effective than shrill denunciation.

Around the world, the United States in recent years has taken on the appearance of the world's scold or the world's nanny, not the world's policeman. Our values prevail. You must follow our values.

We can't do that if we hope to change the world. We have to take account of their values, and as we've heard, certainly in India, the basic heritage and the constitution points in the direction of

religious freedom. In Pakistan, I think there is a basic commitment tot s, but it's not explicit the way it is in India. In recent years, it's gone through particularly hard times. I would commend to your attention the article by Robert Kaplan in the September issue of Atlantic Monthly that shows just what a tough neighborhood Pakistan is these days; how many difficult issues someone like General Musharraf or, if there were an elected government, whatever, face. Religious intolerance is one of them.

Sumit said Pakistan, unlike India, political popularity can be gained through religious intolerance. In India, it's the other way around. So it makes it particularly difficult for a government that wishes to bring the situation to a better outcome.

I think that, for example, a single issue: in Pakistan and India, we've been so focused over the past--this is Marshall Bouton's point about broader engagement--so focused on nonproliferation, we've used the tool of sanctions, which has ultimately been counterproductive. In Pakistan, in the name of nonproliferation, really obliged the Pakistanis to move ahead more rapidly with the production of nuclear warheads and obtaining missiles from China and Korea, exactly the opposite of what we had hoped, because we were focused so much upon this issue; everything we could do, the way we looked at it, to get it through.

Some of the things were politically popular at home, but they were counterproductive out there. We have to avoid this trap.

I think NGOs have a big role to play. They can be more public, more open. At the same time, I think that the point that has been made is very important: to engage with local NGOs who share their objectives. Doing it this way can be much more beneficial. I think that one has to take up the cause or as far as the U.S. is concerned to be seen to take up the cause of all religious persecution so we don't appear to be anti-Islamic. Because we're nervous about Islamic terrorism, we sometimes convey the impression of being anti-Islamic.

In Pakistan, that is for certain that you're going to get a negative response to your efforts to improve religious tolerance for Christians, Ahmadiyyas or others, if you appear to be anti-Islamic. So you have to find a different way of going about it.

I think that private business and foundations can help a great deal. I think the point that I was going to make is the point that Sumit Ganguly has made: helping education. The Pakistani Government itself has pointed out that one of the big failures has been the failure of the education system, so that all education or much of it

for the vast majority comes from the Madrasas [ph]. The degree of illiteracy in both countries, particularly in Pakistan, is extremely high.

One of the things I regret from the sanctions in Pakistan was that it stopped cold a very big, effective program that we had put together with the Government of Pakistan in primary education, with an emphasis among women. They didn't have enough resources; they didn't have enough commitment without us to go ahead with this sort of thing, and so you see the Islamic schools become more prominent. The effects are very, very clear.

I think that this combination will help us a great deal. I think that understanding will help us a great deal. The Congress, the fourth participant, if you will, in the U.S. dialogue, has to understand a little bit better than it does now that its pronouncements are seen not as an independent body but as the U.S. speaking, and we sometimes have that problem ourselves. We look at political statements made abroad; we interpret them as policy statements, and we think that the statements made for political purposes is the one that's going to be carried out. There frequently is a lot of hyperbole in that. We know that from our own political situation; we ought to understand it from abroad and look at the realities and deal with the realities rather than the public perceptions.

I think if we take the sort of combined approach; but I think that over the long term, education is extremely important. India, their emphasis upon high tech is moving away in many areas from a culture of intolerance, but there's still a huge majority of the Indian population that is either illiterate or almost illiterate and ignorant and therefore needs a lot of education, where these primitive appeals to religious intolerance still have political effect.

In Pakistan, the situation is much worse. In India, we helped a great deal by investing a lot of money in the Indian technical institutes, which are now producing high tech people not only in Bangalore but also in Silicon Valley and are beginning to help pull India up as a whole. In Pakistan, that area is--it doesn't exist; it needs a lot more help, and they've acknowledged it, in education. And one of General Musharraf's own pronunciations; he says this is an area which is very, very weak. We need to help in this area if we are going to pull ourselves out of the morass in which we find ourselves.

I think that a combined approach, more sensitive, less shrill, quieter rather than louder, long-term rather than short-term, and we can make progress.

I want to add in closing that I think your Commission, above all Bob Seiphill [ph] have handled this type of thing very, very well. I think you've been much more sensitive than some might have expected. And therefore, I think you've been much more effective.

Thank you.