

Commission Asks Powell to Raise Religious Freedom During Pakistani Minister's Visit

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today released the text of a May 14 letter to Secretary of State Colin L. Powell asking him to raise religious-freedom issues with Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar when the latter visits Washington June 18-20, 2001. Following is the text of the letter:

May 14, 2001

Dear Secretary Powell:

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I urge you to raise in your meeting next month with Pakistan's foreign minister, Mr. Abdul Sattar, the need to promote and protect religious freedom in Pakistan.

Over the last year, the Commission has looked closely at the conditions of religious freedom in Pakistan. In September 2000, the Commission held a public hearing on religious freedom and U.S. policy in Pakistan at which it heard the testimony of witnesses from the region as well as academic experts and a former U.S. diplomat. In December 2000, Commission staff traveled to Pakistan and held numerous meetings with government officials, representatives of religious communities, religious political parties, non-governmental human rights organizations, legal advocates, religious scholars, journalists, humanitarian aid workers, as well as U.S. and other foreign diplomats in Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, and Chenab Nagar (formerly known as Rabwah, the center of the Ahmadi community).

Although the government of Pakistan does not appear to be engaged in a systematic effort to persecute religious minorities, it is clearly not doing enough to protect the religious freedom of all of its citizens. Members of the Ahmadi religious community are prevented by law from engaging in the full practice of their faith. Religious minority groups (including Christians, Ahmadis, and Hindus) complain that they are politically marginalized by a system of separate electorates, and that this system exacerbates other religious-freedom problems. The criminal laws against blasphemy are abused, resulting in detention of and sometimes violence against religious minorities as well as Muslims on account of their religious beliefs. Finally, organized groups of religious extremists among Sunni and Shiite Muslims engage in a significant level of sectarian violence.

General Pervaiz Musharraf, who took power in a military coup in October 1999, announced early in his tenure that his government would address some of these problems. Unfortunately, his government has, so far, failed to live up to many of the expectations that it had raised. Moreover, it has been criticized in Pakistan for capitulating to, and thus emboldening, political and other societal forces that advocate policies antagonistic to the protection of religious freedom for all Pakistanis and the equal citizenship of all religious communities.

In light of the circumstances in Pakistan, the Commission recommends that you urge Mr. Abdul Sattar to make serious and sustained efforts to promote and protect the religious freedom of all the citizens of Pakistan, including:

to remove the system of separate electorates for religious minorities in Pakistan, which is inconsistent with democratic principles and the protection of political rights without discrimination on the basis of religion;

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 reduce and aim at ultimately eliminating their abuse;

to establish and support mechanisms of interfaith dialogue that encompass all religious communities in Pakistan, and to facilitate widespread dissemination of the work and findings of this dialogue; and

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

We hope that Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar's visit to Washington provides an occasion for a serious discussion of religious freedom, tolerance, and sectarian violence in Pakistan.

Respectfully,

Elliott Abrams

Chairman

Hon. Elliott Abrams, Chair

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