

4/14/09: USCIRF: Sharia in Swat Will Embolden Extremists

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Taliban-enforced sharia law went into effect yesterday in part of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP) with Pakistan government approval and will likely result in egregious human rights violations and severe limitations on religious freedom, particularly for women and members of minority religious groups, said the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

“The violent, Taliban-associated extremists based in NWFP's Swat Valley consistently demonstrate their disregard for fundamental human rights, and use public beheadings and beatings as a means of enforcing their control,” said Felice D. Gaer, USCIRF chair. “The U.S. Government should make clear to Islamabad that giving these extremists official control over the judiciary in this strategically-located region will not bring peace. Instead, it will embolden the extremists to commit further egregious human rights violations, including violence against women and anyone who dares oppose their restrictive and arbitrary religious policies.”

On April 13, Pakistan President Asif Zardari signed onto a controversial deal with the Swat Valley's Taliban-associated extremists, giving them official sanction to enforce justice according to their interpretation of sharia, or Islamic law. Despite an outcry by Pakistani and international human rights activists, the deal received bipartisan support in Pakistan's National Assembly.

The deal was first announced in February 2009 as a ceasefire arrangement between the extremists and the provincial government that would cede judicial control to the extremists in exchange for a cessation of violence. Soon after that announcement was made, a Pakistani journalist covering the negotiations in the Swat Valley was kidnapped and murdered. In recent weeks, hundreds across Pakistan have protested the January 2009 public flogging of a young woman in Swat for allegedly appearing with a man who was not her relative.

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