

March 3, 2006: Pakistan: USCIRF Op-ed in The Philadelphia Inquirer

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March 3, 2006 By Michael Cromartie and Dr. Elizabeth H. Prodromou The government of Gen. Pervez Musharraf has been a key player in the Bush administration's efforts against al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants that have retreated into the largely impenetrable areas on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. However, the Musharraf government has done little to combat Islamic extremists within Pakistan who promote violence and discrimination against religious minorities. When President Bush visits Pakistan tomorrow, he should remind Musharraf that his support for these groups is at odds with not only the protection of human rights but also with his commitment to fight terrorism. More than five years after Musharraf vowed to address the sectarian and religiously motivated violence and discrimination that plagues Pakistan, attacks against religious minorities are rampant, and discriminatory legislation fosters an atmosphere of religious intolerance. Pakistan's notorious Hudood Ordinances, which are meant to bring Pakistan's criminal justice system into conformity with Islamic injunctions, provide for punishments such as amputation and death by stoning. Although these punishments have not been applied, the laws have resulted in serious violations of human rights for Pakistani women. Most of the religiously motivated attacks are committed by Sunni extremists against Shia Muslims, Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians. Earlier this month, a suicide bomber killed 23 people marching in northwest Pakistan in observance of Ashura, the Shia holiday, and extremists burned several Christian churches in Sindh province. Pakistan's Ahmadi community, numbering almost four million, is prevented by law from fully practicing their faith. It is illegal for Ahmadis to preach in public, to publish and disseminate their religious materials, and to call their places of worship "mosques." Blasphemy allegations, which are often false, result in the lengthy detention of - and sometimes violence against - Hindus, Christians, Ahmadis and members of other religious minorities, as well as Muslims who question Islamic precepts. Prescribed penalties for blasphemy include death and life imprisonment, and some of the accused have been attacked and even killed by vigilantes while in police custody. Those who escape official punishment or vigilantes are often forced to flee the country. Religious intolerance also informs Pakistan's public school curriculum, which according to the State Department, includes "derogatory remarks against minority religions, particularly Hindus and Jews," as well as other teachings. Such language reinforces religious intolerance. Tomorrow, Bush should urge Musharraf to make serious, sustained efforts to promote and protect the religious freedom of all citizens of Pakistan. Concrete measures should include: repealing the Hudood Ordinances; rescinding laws that criminalize the public practice of the Ahmadi faith; decriminalizing blasphemy; and acting to prevent sectarian violence and punish its perpetrators. A demonstrated U.S.-Pakistani commitment to improving religious freedom conditions in Pakistan is essential to any meaningful advances in the war on terrorism and to successes in the global promotion of democracy. Michael Cromartie is chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Elizabeth H. Prodromou is a member of the commission.