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WASHINGTON, DC – The tragic and brutal assassination today of Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan’s cabinet Minister for Minority Affairs, was an “outgrowth of that country’s blasphemy law, which fuels extremism and violence rather than keeping the peace,” said the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today.

Assassinated today in Islamabad by unknown attackers, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed responsibility for the killing. Bhatti was courageously vocal in his call to amend the flawed blasphemy law, which severely abuses the religious freedoms of Christians and Muslims. Bhatti worked tirelessly for interfaith tolerance and understanding.

“The brutal assassination was an outgrowth of that country’s blasphemy law, which fuels extremism and violence rather than keeping the peace,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. “Threats against his life were widely known, but Minister Bhatti continued to courageously advocate against the forces of violent extremism and the blasphemy law,” said Mr. Leo. “The Commission extends its deepest condolences to the family and friends of Minister Bhatti. He was our friend. He will be missed.”

Bhatti was a life-long advocate for human rights, and had worked for years as a religious freedom advocate before joining the Zardari government. In 2010, USCIRF formally acknowledged Bhatti for his courageous work. On his trips to Washington, most recently last month, USCIRF would arrange meetings for him with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, and key members of Congress and the media.

“We believed he was Pakistan’s brightest light of hope for the advancement of freedom of religion and human rights more broadly,” Mr. Leo said. “Who will now take up his work? Do the highest levels of Pakistan’s government have the resolve, courage, and leadership to do so? To date, they haven’t demonstrated those qualities.”

“The assassination today of Shahbaz Bhatti in Pakistan—a true hero for human rights and religious freedom for all—illustrates how barbaric that country’s system of blasphemy laws really is. Blasphemy laws don’t keep the peace, but embolden extremists,” Chairman Leo observed. “After the murders of Salman Taseer and now Shahbaz Bhatti for their advocacy against the

blasphemy law, President Zardari must find the political courage to enact meaningful reforms, or Pakistan may well be lost.”

“The United States and the international community need to urge Pakistan in the strongest terms to respect the human rights of all its citizens, bring the murderers to justice, and amend this deeply flawed law,” said Mr. Leo. “Hopefully Pakistan and other countries will learn this lesson before any more human rights heroes are killed.”

Bhatti opposed Pakistan’s blasphemy law that criminalizes actions and words that are deemed to offend Islam. It carries a life sentence and in extreme cases the death penalty. Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five, was recently sentenced to death under this law. Bhatti was an outspoken critic of the law and was working for her release. Pakistan is trying to export this law at the United Nations through the defamation of religions resolutions, which attempt to create an international blasphemy standard.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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