

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom (USCIRF) marks the tragic July anniversaries of two major assassinations in Pakistan and urges Pakistan's government to bring the perpetrators to justice.

July 4th is the six-month anniversary of the assassination of Salman Taseer, the Governor of Punjab province. July 2nd marks four months since the Pakistani Taliban assassinated Shahbaz Bhatti, the Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs.

Both officials were members of the ruling Pakistan People's Party and close associates of President Zardari.

"These officials were murdered for daring to oppose Pakistan's blasphemy law," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. "The Zardari government has done virtually nothing to bring the perpetrators to justice. The international community must press Pakistan to do more, so that every citizen knows that violence is unacceptable and that people can stand against the blasphemy law without risking their lives."

Governor Taseer, a Muslim, was shot in Lahore, the capital of Punjab province, on January 4th, by his bodyguard, who reportedly cited Governor Taseer's opposing the blasphemy law as his motive for the murder. Despite this admission, the bodyguard has still not been brought to justice.

On March 2nd, almost two months later, Minister Bhatti, a Christian, was ambushed by the Pakistani Taliban after leaving his mother's house in Islamabad. Little has been done to investigate the crime and no one has been arrested for the murder.

“The murders of Governor Taseer and Minister Bhatti demonstrate how the blasphemy law has fueled a culture of violence that threatens both Muslims and members of minority religious communities and has given extremists the upper hand,” said Leo. “To counter this culture of impunity, the Pakistani government must find the resolve and courage to bring the killers to justice.”

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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