

## **USCIRF URGES PAKISTAN TO TAKE ACTION AGAINST VIOLENT RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM**

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) marked the 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the murder of Shahbaz Bhatti with a renewed call for the Pakistani government to both bring his killers to justice and stem the rising tide of violent religious extremism that victimizes all Pakistanis. Pakistan's Federal Minister for Minority Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, the only Christian in the cabinet, was gunned down in Islamabad on March 2, 2011. Despite the Pakistani Taliban claiming responsibility for the killing the attackers remain at large and the investigation seemingly has ended.

“With two years having passed, it is long past time for the Pakistani government to bring Bhatti's killers to justice,” said USCIRF Chair Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett. “President Zardari should insist that the Ministry of Interior and other Pakistani agencies vigorously investigate the murder and arrest the culprits of this heinous act. How can religious minorities have confidence in their government if it does not fully investigate the murder of a sitting cabinet minister?”

Shahbaz Bhatti was appointed Minority Affairs Minister in 2008 and was reappointed in February 2011, just before his murder. Mr. Bhatti used the position to secure government assistance for victims of religiously-motivated mob violence, advocate publicly for reform of the blasphemy laws, and increase public focus on religious minorities' concerns. After his death, Dr. Paul Bhatti, his brother, was appointed as Advisor to the Prime Minister on Interfaith Harmony, a position he still holds.

“The rising tide of violent religious extremism is deeply troubling and victimizes all Pakistanis, both Muslims and non-Muslims across the country,” said Lantos Swett. “The recent bombing targeting Hazara Shi'a that killed 89 innocent people should further compel the Pakistani government to do more to protect all its citizens and proactively crack down on banned groups that take credit for the attacks.”

USCIRF has repeatedly identified Pakistan as a particularly severe violator of religious freedom due to the systematic, ongoing and egregious violations that the government both perpetrates and tolerates. In addition to violence against Shi'a Muslims, Pakistan's application of its notorious blasphemy law against Christians and others is of concern. The Ahmadi community continues to suffer grievously from violence, discrimination and abuse, and Hindus increasingly are among the victims of Pakistan's climate of intolerance. Because of the very poor religious freedom environment, USCIRF recommended in its 2012 Annual Report that the United States designate Pakistan as a “country of particular concern.”