

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

Pakistan: The Threat of Religious Extremism to Religious Freedom and Security

**Opening Remarks: Commission Chair Felice Gaer
Tuesday, March 17, 2009**

Welcome to today's hearing, during which the US Commission on International Religious Freedom will examine the threat that religious extremism poses to security, human rights and religious freedom in Pakistan. The domestic political crisis in Pakistan this past weekend, and the restriction of human rights and freedoms during it, underline the difficulties U.S. policymakers face in dealing with that strategic country. The Commission has been concerned about a rising threat of religious extremism that promotes violence in Pakistan, and South Asia, one of the world's most troubled regions.

This is the third in the US Commission's series of hearings exploring the nexus of religious extremism and security, and the impact of religious extremism on freedom of thought, conscience and religion and other human rights. The first was on Sudan, September 24, 2008; the second on Bangladesh, December 4.

Our 5 distinguished witnesses today and my fellow Commissioners will explore the dimensions and manifestations of religious extremism in Pakistan and what the United States government can do to help Pakistan counter the ongoing threat of religious extremism and other severe violations of human rights.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Commission and its work: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by Congress in 1998 to review violations of religious freedom and belief abroad. The Commission is also tasked with giving specific policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress on how U.S. policy can most effectively advance freedom of religion and related human rights around the world.

Given the history of US-Pakistan relations going back to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the geo-political climate and national security needs facing both nations today, it is no exaggeration to say that the U.S. relationship with Pakistan is among the most important facing U.S. policymakers.

Each year since 2002, the Commission has recommended to the State Department that Pakistan be designated a Country of Particular Concern (or “CPC”) under the International Religious Freedom Act. Despite the Commission's view that the government of Pakistan has repeatedly “engaged in or tolerated systemic and egregious violations” of the universal right of freedom of religion or belief, the State Department has not followed the Commission's recommendations.

We are concerned about the following issues in Pakistan:

- the inadequate response of the government of Pakistan to persistent sectarian and religiously motivated violence, which mainly targets Shi’a Muslims but also Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, Baha’is, and other religious minorities;
- the highly abused blasphemy laws, which result in the detention –often prolonged detention without charges --of, and sometimes violence against, members of religious minority communities, as well as against some Muslims on account of their religious beliefs; women have been particularly victimized by these laws;
- official government policies, such as the anti-Ahmadi laws which prevent the Ahmadis from engaging in the full practice of their faith;
- the largely unchecked growth of Islamic extremist groups whose members take part in violence targeting religious minorities in Pakistan and who are linked to international terrorism in the region and beyond;
- the relationship between religious extremists and elements in the Pakistani military, particularly Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI);
- the alleged role of Pakistan’s Islamic schools, or madrassas, in providing ideological training to religious extremists and in creating an atmosphere of intolerance in which abuses of religious freedom are more likely to occur;
- the impact of religiously-based intolerance, extremism, and violence on all Pakistanis, including harsh restrictions on the equal rights of women to freedom of thought conscience and religion.
- the Pakistan government’s apparent willingness to accommodate certain violent extremists, as we saw recently in the Swat Valley, where they

imposed, with government approval, their own, particularly harsh interpretation of Shari'a, or Islamic law; and

- the leadership role Pakistan is playing at the United Nations to promote the flawed “defamation of religions” resolution, which attempts to seriously limit the freedoms of religion and expression, and to insert this issue into the Durban Review Conference, as well.

Given all these factors, what should the United States do? Should we pressure Pakistan to oppose the extremists directly? If so, what foreign policy tools should be deployed? -- diplomacy, economic aid, or multilateral bodies? Can the International Religious Freedom Act assist this effort? Given the political and civil turmoil in Pakistan, where does the United States turn for real allies? And finally, what recommendations can our invited experts make for improving the religious and human rights of Pakistan's most vulnerable people – its women and religious minorities?

As we hold this hearing I should note that we are only a few weeks into a new U.S. Administration, which has announced it is in the process of reviewing U.S. relations with Pakistan.

In an interview, published in the New York Times March 6, President Obama was clear that his administration sees Pakistan's problem with religious extremism as a U.S. national security issue.

“As long as you've got safe havens in these border regions that the Pakistani government can't control or reach, in effective ways, we're going to continue to see vulnerability on the Afghan side of the border,” he said. “And so it's very important for us to reach out to the Pakistani government, and work with them more effectively.”

This week, the Obama administration is expected to unveil its plans for the war in Afghanistan. Some claim that Pakistan will be enlisted to play a stepped up role in curtailing religious extremism and dismantling the safe havens of the Taliban. All of these issues require our attention today.

To speak to these complex and confounding challenges, we are pleased to have before us a distinguished panel of experts, from a variety of backgrounds. Before we hear from them, let me just say a word about the structure of the hearing. We have asked each of our panelists to speak for 10 minutes, to leave plenty of time

for follow-up questions and responses. Each of our witnesses has been invited to submit longer statements that will be posted on the Commission's web site www.uscirf.gov.

Please allow me to introduce our speakers:

William B. Milam served as U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan 1998-2001 and is now a Senior Policy Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center here in Washington. A distinguished author and columnist, Ambassador Milam will discuss relations between the United States and Pakistan, and particularly how to improve cooperation.

Steve Coll is the President and CEO of the New America Foundation. Mr. Coll is a Pulitzer-winning foreign correspondent, a former managing editor of *The Washington Post*, and the author of *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden: From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. Mr. Coll will discuss the implications of the extremist threat to the security of Pakistan and beyond.

Ali Dayan Hasan is Senior South Asia Researcher with Human Rights Watch, the largest US-based human rights advocacy organization. Mr. Hasan, who is based in Pakistan, will provide up-to-date information on human rights conditions there, particularly as related to freedom of religion or belief, and the role of the government of Pakistan, either in fostering or in restricting universal human rights.

Azhar Hussain is Vice President for Preventive Diplomacy at the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD). As head of its Pakistan Madrasa Project, he will speak to the role played by Pakistan's thousands of Islamic schools or madrassas, the relationship between Islamic education and growth in Pakistan of religious extremism and intolerance. He will discuss what the U.S. government can do to promote more tolerance for diverse views and respect for human rights among Pakistan's schoolchildren.

Ayesha Jalal is Professor of History at Tufts University, a recipient of the prestigious MacArthur "genius" grant, and author of *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in South Asia*. A leading scholar of Pakistan cultural and political history, Professor Jalal will place these issues in their historical context, explain the interplay of religion and politics in Pakistan, and share with us the reaction of the vast majority

of Pakistanis who are not extremists to the challenge to Pakistani society posed by religiously-motivated, violent extremism.