

## **USCIRF Briefing on the Future of Religious Freedom in Pakistan July 18, 2013**

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) hosted a briefing and panel discussion on the future of religious freedom in Pakistan on July 18, 2013. Also on July 18, USCIRF released a report, *Pakistan's History of Violence: A Chronology of Targeted Violence against Religious Communities* that detailed the history of targeted violence against religious communities in Pakistan over the past 18 months.

Representatives from a wide array of nongovernmental organizations, government agencies, and the press attended the briefing. Panel members repeatedly emphasized the need for Pakistan to: actively prosecute the perpetrators of religiously-motivated violence; reform or repeal its blasphemy law and other discriminatory legislation; and eliminate the prejudicial rhetoric taught in Pakistani schools.

Speakers included Shuja Nawaz, Director of the South Asia Center at the Atlantic Council; [Peter Bhatti](#), the chairman of International Christian Voice and the brother of assassinated Pakistani Cabinet member Shahbaz Bhatti; [Qasim Rashid](#), the national spokesperson for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA; Rahat Husain, Director of Policy and Legal Affairs for the [Universal Muslim Association of America](#); and Jay Kansara, Associate Director of the [Hindu American Foundation](#).

[Knox Thames](#), USCIRF's Director of Policy and Research, moderated the panel and reviewed the major findings of the Commission's Pakistan Religious Violence Project. During the 203 publicly-reported instances of sectarian violence that took place between January 2012 and June 2013, more than 700 people were killed and more than 1,100 were injured. The Shi'a community was hit the hardest by the sectarian violence, with 635 individuals killed in 77 separate attacks. Thames noted that the solutions to the violence "are as obvious as they are difficult," in that better law enforcement is needed, along with legal reform.

Shuja Nawaz provided the audience with an overview of Pakistan's religious landscape and its history of religious discrimination and violence. Nawaz said that Pakistan has failed to learn lessons from its history and instability that has left the country vulnerable to extremists. He urged Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to speak out against religiously-motivated violence, noted that the people of Pakistan are growing increasingly impatient with the sectarian violence and the government's inaction, and emphasized that the government and people need to be more accepting of different religious beliefs.

"As long as Pakistan feels alienated and insecure, [the Pakistani] people will feel alienated and insecure as well," he said.

Following Nawaz's remarks, the four panelists explained how sectarian violence in Pakistan has harmed their religious communities. The panelists also offered policy recommendations for both the United States and Pakistan on how to approach these issues and improve religious freedom conditions across the nation.

Peter Bhatti emphasized the role that Christians played in the creation of Pakistan. He noted that Punjab may have never been part of Pakistan without the support at the time of Pakistan's creation of the Christian leader of Punjab province. He said that discriminatory laws, such as the blasphemy law, lend support to extremist religious organizations such as the Taliban and al Qaeda.

"Most of the time extremists use these laws to settle personal, economic, political, religious or other disputes," he said. "Christians feel insecure and fearful in their motherland. These laws have encouraged hundreds of incidents during which innocent Christians have been victimized, persecuted, burnt alive, and had their churches and properties burnt and demolished. Many people currently are in prison and waiting for trials."

Bhatti said that Christians often are targeted because they are thought to be supporters or representatives of the West, since they share the same the faith as the majority of the populations of Western nations. He said attacks on Christians are more likely when Western nations have conflicts with Muslim nations. Bhatti also recommended that Pakistan repeal its blasphemy laws, strengthen human rights organizations and political parties, and bring to justice the perpetrators of crimes against religious minorities. He suggested that Pakistan empower religious minorities by including them in "the mainstream of political life by allowing them to run for general seats, as well as keep their reserved seats. Such a dual voting system would help uplift religious minorities."

Qasim Rashid, speaking on behalf of the Ahmadi community, said the blasphemy and discriminatory voting laws are two of the biggest constraints on Ahmadis' religious freedom in Pakistan. These laws explicitly violate several provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) – a treaty that Pakistan signed without any reservations. The Pakistani Constitution labels Ahmadis as non-Muslims, and in order to vote in elections, Chief Executive Order No. 15 requires Ahmadis to either declare themselves "Ahmadi" and affirm the government's assertion that they are not Muslim, or declare themselves Muslim only after denouncing Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (known to Ahmadis as the Promised Messiah) as a false prophet.

"Ahmadi Muslims are the only demographic disenfranchised from voting in Pakistan," Rashid said. These voting restrictions conflict with Article 25 of the ICCPR, which guarantees individuals the right to participate in public affairs, including voting.

Other Pakistani laws targeting religious minorities violate basic human rights and several other provisions of the ICCPR, he said. The government of Pakistan violated Ahmadis' right to peaceably assemble under Article 21 of the ICCPR when it refused to let them hold their annual peace conference. Finally, the anti-blasphemy law violates Article 18(1), which guarantees a right to "freedom of thought, conscious, and religion." Rashid recommended that the government of Pakistan repeal the laws that place restrictions on Ahmadis, repeal Chief Executive Order No. 15, and prosecute individuals who participate in hate crimes against religious minorities.

Rahat Husain said that the Pakistani government is complicit in regard to banned extremist groups' attacks on Shi'as. "The Pakistani government has failed to take any serious actions against the terror groups, and indeed appears to be reducing previous activities to combat terror," he said. He drew attention to the series of bombings earlier this year in Quetta that targeted Shi'a communities

and left more than 117 people dead. Human Rights Watch described these bombings as the “single worst atrocities against the Hazara in Pakistan’s history.”

Husain said that the government needs to actively protect the Hazara Shia community or risk portraying an image of indifference or complicity in these mass atrocities. He criticized Pakistan for taking foreign aid but doing nothing to improve either its own security or its citizens’ rights. He said that the government has failed to create “a rational or logical plan” to combat sectarian violence promulgated by terrorist groups.

“While many analysts in the U.S. government have noted that funds, while funds have been earmarked for combating militancy, they have instead been reallocated, sometimes disappearing in a surprising show of corruption,” Husain said. “By politically allying itself with [terrorist] groups, the Pakistani Government seems to be locked into a downward spiral and taking the country with it.”

Jay Kansara noted that the Hindu community is attacked in Pakistan through, among other actions, biased and hateful rhetoric in school textbooks and the kidnapping and forced conversion of young Hindu girls. He quoted a passage from a fifth-grade Pakistani social studies book, which reads “[t]he religious beliefs of the Muslims and Hindus are absolutely different. The Hindus worship many Idols. They have many Gods and Goddesses. The Muslims believe in one Allah who is Almighty and who is Creator of the universe. The Muslims worship Allah.”

Kansara called on the government of Pakistan to supply students with textbooks with no inflammatory or prejudicial material. He argued that such material creates a sense of inferiority among minority students and solidifies rhetoric spouted by extremists. On numerous occasions, Hindu girls have been kidnapped, and forcefully converted to Islam and married off, Kansara said. Police refuse to act or help the victims. He also recommended that the Pakistani government bring to justice the perpetrators of these attacks and rapes and work harder to prevent these attacks from taking place in the first place.