

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Statement of
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Let me first of all express my appreciation for this Commission and the Chairwoman. And I'm going to take an opportunity.

I think this room must have been chosen for a reason. The backdrops behind you are words that are secular and Western, but I think have value. And so I'll just simply indicate the words of Hubert Humphrey, "the moral test of a government is how it treats those who are at the dawn of life, the children, those who are in the twilight of life, the aged, and those who are in the shadow of life, the sick and the needy and the handicapped." That speaks to what I would call religious values in the United States spoken secularly, that we care about those who cannot care for themselves. And so as we look to how religion is respected in other countries, we look to it in how the least who cannot speak for themselves, protect themselves, are protected.

My name is Sheila Jackson Lee. I represent the 18th Congressional District and I founded and I co-chair the Pakistan Caucus. We are members, both Democratic and Republican, who have been the fastest-growing caucus. And we believe that we strike a balance of reason on just what the Chairwoman has indicated about the value of the relationship between the United States and Pakistan. Having visited on many, many occasions, most recently in the beginning of February, meeting with the heads of government, having spoken to – during her lifetime and as she was coming back to Pakistan – Benazir Bhutto, working with the former president as well, and going to Pakistan for the first time with President Clinton – when I say for the first time meaning for the first time of trying to restore relationships – I realize that we walk somewhat of a difficult line.

But when you're friends, you should not hesitate to tell the truth. And frankly, it is important to recognize that the needs in Pakistan are far-ranging. It is a country that controls only a portion of its land. The frontier area is not controlled by the government of Pakistan. It is in fact a frontier area, bordered by Afghanistan and involved in the emerging and rising conflict of violence in Afghanistan and with the Taliban. The Taliban has now taken hold and roots in the area, even more so than one might have hoped. And so, these issues of religious conflict now have become issues of war.

This is a time for voices of reason to be raised and to also provide the impetus and the promotion of NGOs, which are, I believe, fewer than those in other countries. There are issues dealing with the treatment of women. I have engaged in those and fought the government on

how women have been treated. The issues of motivated or increased violence, the blasphemy laws, victimize women as the chairwoman has indicated. Unchecked Islamic extremists noted in the Swat area, the alleged role of the madrassas, all those raise their heads.

But yet, there is hope. There is a government that looks to be secular and to be respectful of other religions. Many would criticize Pakistani government over and over again for allegations of corruption. I think it is important to, at the same time, while making very strong statements against the infringement of religious freedom, that we also look the glimmer of hope.

And where are those glimmers of hope? One, in the Pakistani-American community that has been asking over and over to be more engaged, to be able to promote aspects of trade and enlightenment, to be able to protect – as I said – NGOs and international NGOs, to organize against those who would stand for religious intolerance. In addition, I think we should take hope in the fact that the chief justice is to be reinstated. And it was a peaceful coming together. What we have to be fearful of is that one side that managed the protests will believe that they have won and therefore that they should continue to disrupt the government.

We in the United States government are looking – and Congress – are looking to legislate legislation that will promote the good things that happen in Pakistan. The idea of greater empowerment in the Peshawar area to provide resources so that farmers can farm and women can have businesses and that we can have the kind of life, if you will, that focuses on civilian needs -- taking care of those who cannot take care of themselves. But I do think that we foil our responsibilities if we are silent on the atrocities that happened in Pakistan, even though they're our friend. In fact, we fail across the world if we do not stand against foe and friend alike when they fracture the human rights of those who live within their borders.

So this particular hearing is one that I look forward to reading the testimony, even though I'll be absent, and working with the Commission to find the right balance of legislation that speaks truthfully to this issue. And I do believe that we should have a situation where the State Department looks at the requests for citing this country as one where we have concerns. We can't fix what we don't pay attention to. We can't uplift what we don't know. And so I think this Commission and the testimony that we'll hear today and the statements that will be made will be a first step.

But I close by simply saying this: It is important to see the cup as being half-full rather than half-empty. It is important that whatever we attempt to do that we try to build the infrastructure that is there to help make a difference. They are there. Visiting Pakistan, there are families there, there are religious leaders there who simply want to live in peace. Let us find them. Let us build them up. Let us make them work. But at the same time, show them that we will protect them and that we will stand against those who would undermine what is basically a country that was founded on democratic principles by the founding Mr. Jinnah who understood that democracy meant something and the protection of religion would mean something as well.

Thank you. And I yield back. Thank you commissioners for your indulgence – not your intolerance, I hope – but your indulgence of my having to rush away and to tend to my duties. Thank you very much.