

Virginia Statement on the Islamic Republic of Pakistan

issued by the Religious Liberty Partnership

April 2011

As members of the Religious Liberty Partnership (RLP) meeting in Virginia, USA, we appeal to the worldwide church *to pray for the nation of Pakistan*. We mourn the callous murder of Federal Minister Shahbaz Bhatti last month and feel this sentiment acutely because he was scheduled to have been a keynote speaker to address our conference. We specifically call on Christian denominations, churches, and organisations worldwide to take this appeal to their members to pray for Pakistan in recognition that we are one body united in Christ.

1. The RLP acknowledges

- The voices of leaders around the world representing all faith communities who have spoken out condemning the recent violence perpetrated in Pakistan by religious extremists, including many Pakistani civil liberty and human rights organizations.
- That the tragic murder of Federal Minister Bhatti on March 2, 2011, represented his greatest sacrifice, in that he had previously stated his willingness to risk his life for his uncompromising commitment to standing for the rights of minorities.
- That upholding the ideals of the pluralistic foundation for the country first proclaimed by Quaid-e-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah also cost the life of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, whose murder we grieve. We recognize the tragic loss to the nation of this public servant. He paid the ultimate price for speaking the truth, for criticising the blasphemy laws and for stating his opinion that sufficient evidence did not exist to uphold a conviction in the blasphemy case of a Christian defendant, Asia Bibi, thereby standing up for the rights of a vulnerable mother of five children.

- The Pakistani coalition government's courageous statements condemning these acts of senseless violence. We applaud the stance of President Asif Ali Zardari who declared that, "We will not be intimidated nor will we retreat," recalling that his wife, Benazir Bhutto was also assassinated by extremists.
- That Christians and other religious minorities were given the right to vote in general elections for any candidates and not just their reserved seats, first exercised in March 2008 which eliminated the separate elections for minorities.
- That, under the current government and through the work of the late Shahbaz Bhatti, new measures have been taken in the interest of religious minorities, including a five percent job quota in government positions, four reserved seats in the Senate, an annual Minorities Day, prayer rooms for non-Muslims in prison and a national helpline linked to the Ministry for Minorities.
- That in June 2010 Pakistan ratified the U.N. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and we encourage the full implementation thereof without any significant reservation.
- That, after more than a decade of leading efforts by the Organization of Islamic Conference to pass "Defamation of Religions" resolutions at United Nations, during the March 2011 16th Session of the U.N. Human Rights Council, Pakistan set aside this agenda in favour of a resolution in line with international law on freedom of religion and freedom of expression.
- That the Church in Pakistan has played a vital role in interfaith dialogue and promotion of peace between religious communities.
- That the Church around the world and within Pakistan, including several Dioceses of the Church of Pakistan, have generously given humanitarian relief, assistance to displaced people, and practical aid to victims of recent natural catastrophes in various parts of Pakistan.
- The historical role of churches in Pakistan in providing high quality education and health care services, including church-administrated (as opposed to nationalized) schools and the Cathedral school system.

2. The RLP raises the following concerns

- That Pakistan has become an epicentre of religious intolerance and religiously-motivated violence in the region and beyond; and that hundreds of Pakistani citizens have been killed by acts of terrorism.
- That institutional discrimination is embedded within the governing instruments which overtly discriminate against non-Muslims and impose restrictions on religious practices in the country; that a number of provisions within the current Constitution of Pakistan, the Hudood Ordinances, some provisions within the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), and various legal and social structures overtly treat non-Muslims as second class citizens.
- That Christians and other minorities (including Ahmadis) are also discriminated against in virtually every aspect of life. They are vulnerable and subject to abuse by accusers in civil and religious courts due to the discriminatory application of witness testimony and no legal recourse for false accusations.
- That 40-50 Pakistani citizens of all faiths are formally charged with blasphemy every year under Sections 295A, B and C of the PPC, exemplified by the highly publicized cases of Asia Bibi, convicted in November 2010; Muslim prayer leader, Mohammed Shafi, and his son, convicted of blasphemy in January 2011; and Qamar David, a Christian found dead in his prison cell after five years in jail.
- The continuing impunity for those responsible for the anti-Christian atrocities perpetrated in the towns of Korian and Gojra in 2009. That increasing numbers of Christians are being forced to live in hiding or even flee Pakistan as the situation deteriorates and that this adds to the vulnerability of the community.

3. The RLP calls on the Pakistani authorities

- To establish a judicial inquiry into the murders of Shahbaz Bhatti and Salman Taseer and to release and publicize the resulting report, release and publicize prior investigative reports of anti-Christian violence, and follow-up previous Federal level requests to the Punjab government for this information.

- In memory of the principles adhered to by the late Federal Minister, work towards abolishing the blasphemy laws and, until they are abolished, to expeditiously pass and implement measures to prevent the misuse of these laws, such as procedural and evidential safeguards for the accused, consideration of the question of intent, penalties for false accusations, as well as support and protection for those who defend or support victims of blasphemy laws. To repeal all domestic legislation and constitutional provisions that discriminate against minorities, and to take further measures to ensure the equality of all Pakistanis.
- To increase reserved seats for minorities within the National Assembly and Provincial Assemblies equivalent to the increase in overall seats in these Parliaments since 1947, without decreasing the voting rights of minorities.
- To return all of the nationalized educational institutions to their former church administration, especially Murray College in Sialkot, Gordon College in Rawalpindi, and Edwardes College in Peshawar; to provide non-Muslim students with an option to study their own faiths, rather than being forced to study Islam.
- To remove Pakistan's reservations to the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) without delay;
- To implement international standards of non-discrimination based on race, religion, and gender, found in Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ICCPR, and other U.N. instruments.
- To implement the 18th Amendment passed by the National Assembly in 2010 which provided a set aside of 5% employment for non-Muslims within government jobs.
- To engage in educational reform, with particular focus on the elimination of discrimination from schools, including madrassas and national curriculum text books; to reform the education system so as to provide state-funded education to every child.
- To encourage television and radio programming that promotes tolerance and equality of all minorities within the society.

4. The RLP calls on the international community

- To support the Government of Pakistan in fulfilling its human rights commitments under international law and in the long-term fight against terrorism and extremist ideologies within its borders;
- To urge the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and refugee resettlement parties to recognize Christians endangered within Pakistan as refugees and reduce the burden of proof to demonstrate eligibility for refugee resettlement. Pakistani minorities who have fled to Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and other countries seeking refugee status should have their cases expeditiously reviewed without discrimination.
- To link military aid to Pakistan to the overall human rights situation in Pakistan.

5. The RLP calls on the Christian and non-Christian Pakistani Diaspora

- To make use of their own liberties in their new countries of residence to speak out with a united voice on behalf of those who do not have freedom of religion.
- To partner with lawyer associations and civil society organizations in Pakistan seeking justice, rule of law, and legal reform.

6. The RLP calls on the worldwide church

- To engage in jointly building the unity of the church within Pakistan;
- To encourage, participate in, and resource interfaith dialogue;
- To challenge and assist the church within Pakistan to continue providing excellent education and health care services, motivating teachers to teach and more educated Pakistanis to take up education as a profession thereby building mutual respect and tolerance.
- To unite in action, increase coordinated prayer for Pakistan, finding a common ground to pray and creative ways to carry out ministries.

- To support media ministry and undertake leadership development.
- To approach public commentary and actions relating to Pakistan with sensitivity, in recognition of potentially negative impact on Christians in Pakistan.

7. The RLP commits

- To call for all of our constituencies, including the Pakistani Diaspora and the Church worldwide, to pray for the Church in Pakistan as it seeks to respond in a Christ-like manner to religious liberty violations.
- To bring the plight of the Pakistani people to our constituencies and raise issues of justice and equality to our own governmental authorities.

[Editorial note: The list of signatory members of the Religious Liberty Partnership can be viewed at <http://tinyurl.com/RLP-Pakistan-2011>]

The Religious Liberty Partnership (RLP) is a collaborative effort of Christian organizations from around the world focused on religious liberty. The RLP seeks to more intentionally work together in addressing advocacy, assistance, and in raising the awareness of religious persecution globally. Members of the RLP are substantially involved (time, personnel, and resources) with ministry to persecuted Christians and/or on religious liberty issues in whatever context and strategy. For more information on the Pakistan Statement or on the Religious Liberty Partnership, see <http://www.rlppartnership.org> or contact Brian O'Connell, RLP Facilitator at: Brian@REACTServices.com; +1 425-218-4718.