

Christians in Pakistan chilled by assassination

by [Anto Akkara](#) in the [April 5, 2011](#) issue

Christian schools and colleges across Pakistan shut down for three days to protest the March 2 assassination in Islamabad of Shahbaz Bhatti, a Roman Catholic who was minister for religious minorities. Christians and secular groups marched in the cities of Lahore, Karachi, Hyderabad and Faisalabad to protest the killing.

The call for action came at an ecumenical meeting chaired by Archbishop Lawrence Saldana, president of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Pakistan. In a press statement, church leaders said that if Pakistan "becomes a killing field" of people "who exercise their freedom of conscience and expression," then "criminals trying to take charge of the country" will be emboldened.

Bhatti, 42, was ambushed and shot dead as he was being driven to his office. He was a critic of Pakistan's blasphemy law, which makes criticism of the Prophet Muhammad a capital crime in the Muslim-majority nation.

Last November, Bhatti initiated a clemency petition for Asia Bibi, a Christian woman currently in prison on blasphemy charges. "My life is under threat. I am getting threat calls regularly," Bhatti said at the end of a telephone interview November 22. On January 4, another high-ranking government figure, Punjab governor Salman Taseer, was killed after he criticized the blasphemy law.

"We salute the courage of Shahbaz who knowingly put his life in danger by speaking up boldly against the blasphemy law," said Archbishop Saldana. "We decided to close all the institutions to honor his sacrifice."

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Azariah, general secretary of the National Council of Churches in Pakistan, said in a telephone interview that "words cannot describe our feelings" at the news of Bhatti's killing. "We are stunned."

In New York, the Islamic Society of North America said it was "outraged" by the killing.

World

leaders, including President Barack Obama, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, British Prime Minister David Cameron and Pope Benedict XVI, paid tribute to Bhatti.

Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, in a letter to the prime minister of Pakistan called the crime "heinous and outrageous." Calling for protection of religious minorities, Tveit said, "Extremists will stop at nothing in their desperate attempt to force religious extremism and violence on Pakistani society." —ENInews