

Pakistani churches criticize government's refusal to amend blasphemy law

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Bangalore, India, January 13 (ENInews) – Churches in Pakistan have expressed frustration over the government's refusal to amend a controversial blasphemy law, as urged by the Pope and protesting civil rights activists.

"We are disappointed by the stand taken by the Prime Minister," said Joseph Francis, director of CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid Assistance & Settlement), which has defended dozens of Christians and Muslims charged under the law.

"With the protests growing from both sides, we were expecting the government to take a strong stand on this (blasphemy law)," Francis told ENInews on 13 January. "Unfortunately, the government response has been negative," he said.

On 11 January, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani responded to questions from journalists that "it is our law and we will work according to our law." He was being asked about Pope Benedict XVI's call to repeal the law, which makes insulting Islam a crime punishable by death. The Pope had said the law "serves as a pretext for acts of injustice and violence against religious minorities."

The papal remark came on the heels of the 4 January assassination of Salman Taseer, governor of Punjab province, by his security guard. Taseer had called the law a 'black law.' The 64-year old governor had drawn the ire of Islamic fundamentalists after he met Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five sentenced to death in early November on blasphemy charges, in prison to initiate a presidential pardon for her.

Besides rejecting the papal demand, Gilani also urged the media to be 'responsible' and stop the controversy on the blasphemy law even as Islamist protesters took to

the streets against the demand of the head of the Catholic church.

The organization representing Pakistan's four mainline Protestant churches also expressed displeasure with Gilani. "We are certainly frustrated by the response of the Prime Minister," Victor Azariah, general secretary of the National Council of Churches in Pakistan (NCCP), told ENInews from his office at Lahore. He also pointed out that "the negative government response was no surprise in the present political situation."

"When the government survival itself is dependent on (political) parties that support the blasphemy law, what can we expect from the government?" asked Azariah.

The Pakistan People's Party that heads the coalition government under Gilani has just 125 seats in the 342-member National Assembly. The fragile coalition government relies on the support of independent legislators and Islamic parties that insist on upholding the blasphemy law for their support for the government.

"It is a very difficult situation for the government," admitted Mehboob Ahmed Khan, a civil rights activist and member of independent Pakistan Human Rights Commission, when contacted by ENInews.

Khan has been part of coalition of civil rights groups under the banner of 'Citizens of Democracy' that had campaigned against the abuse of the blasphemy law and organized candlelight vigils with church groups to protest Taseer's assassination.