

# Pakistan's minister for religious minorities assassinated

News

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Islamabad, Pakistan, March 2 (ENInews)--Pakistan's Minister for Religious Minorities and the only Christian cabinet member, Shahbaz Bhatti, was assassinated on 2 March outside his home in Islamabad. He was the second high-ranking Pakistan government official murdered this year after expressing opposition to the country's law that makes criticism of the Prophet Muhammad a capital crime.

Bhatti was leaving for his office when the attack occurred. Witnesses and police said three or four gunmen in a white car drove up, firing as many as 50 shots at his black sedan.

Before escaping, the assassins dropped leaflets around the scene that stated Bhatti was murdered due to his opposition to the blasphemy law. The pamphlets said the Pakistani Taliban and Al-Qaeda were responsible for the slaying.

Bhatti had said he felt he was in danger as he called for reform of the law. "I am receiving threats on speaking against the blasphemy law, but my faith gives me strength and we will not allow the handful of extremists to fulfill their agenda," he said recently.

The international social-justice organization, Human Rights Watch, said that Bhatti's killing was the result of "appeasement of extremist and militant groups" in Pakistan. It criticized the "political cowardice" of the ruling party, the Pakistan Peoples Party.

A Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said Bhatti's murder "demonstrates that the Pope's insistent addresses regarding violence against Christians and religious freedom have been justified." The attack appeared to be connected to Mr. Bhatti's support for changes to Pakistan's blasphemy law. Lombardi noted that Bhatti was the first Catholic to hold his post. "He had been received by the Holy Father last September where he had affirmed his commitment

for the pacific cohabitation between the religious communities of his country," Lombardi said.

On 4 January, Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab, was gunned down after he expressed support for a Christian woman, Asia Bibi, who is imprisoned for the alleged crime of blasphemy. Taseer had campaigned to reform the law, which calls for the death penalty for those accused of speaking against the Prophet Muhammad.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, said they heard of the murder "with the greatest shock and sorrow." They said that "this further instance of sectarian bigotry and violence will increase anxiety worldwide about the security of Christians and other religious minorities in Pakistan, and we urge that the government of Pakistan will do all in its power to bring to justice those guilty of such crimes and to give adequate protection to minorities."

The U.K. advocacy group, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said Bhatti was dedicated to realizing the vision of Pakistan's founders: "a harmonious, pluralist society." Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said Bhatti and Taseer's murders mean "questions need to be asked about the government's ability and willingness to protect those who speak out against extremism in Pakistan." He noted that Bhatti had coordinated a statement in July 2010 in which "leaders of all faiths denounced acts of terror in Pakistan." The killing "shows more than ever before the need for others to take up the mantle of his pioneering work," Thomas said.

Bishop Samuel Azariah, Presiding Bishop of the Church of Pakistan, said the Christian community is sad and hurt and considers itself "absolutely unsafe in the present circumstances of Pakistan. We do not have the freedom of expressing our point of view." He also said that the government has either lost the will or the control over groups and individuals who kill leaders in the name of religion. He added that the blasphemy laws are being misused and abused by religious zealots.