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Catholic Pakistani minister receives death threats

by Deborah Gyapong by Catholic News Service



Shahbaz Bhatti, a Catholic and Pakistan's minorities minister, poses in front of a mural at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops headquarters in Washington Sept. 16, 2009. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)

OTTAWA, Ontario -- Pakistan's minister for minorities refuses to stop speaking against his country's blasphemy law even though he is a primary target for assassination.

"I have been told by pro-Taliban religious extremists that if I will continue to speak against the blasphemy law, I will be beheaded," said Shahbaz Bhatti, the first Christian to hold a cabinet post in Pakistan.

Bhatti, a Roman Catholic, said he does not feel any fear.

"As a Christian, I believe Jesus is my strength," he said. "He has given me a power and wisdom and motivation to serve the suffering humanity.

"I follow the principles of my conscience, and I am ready to die and sacrifice my life for the principles I believe," he said.

Bhatti was in Ottawa Feb. 7, meeting with Canadian cabinet ministers to raise awareness of his campaign

to reform the blasphemy law, which has been used to persecute Christians and other religious minorities.

"I want Canada and Pakistan to join hands together to promote interfaith harmony based on religious freedom," he said, describing Canada as a supporter of human rights. Canada, he said, provides an example of the interfaith relations he hopes to realize at home.

Pakistan's blasphemy law was imposed in 1986 by General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, the former military dictator and president, who, Bhatti said, wanted to use religion as a "political tool to divide the Pakistani nation."

"Religious minorities, especially Christians, have paid a heavy price," he said.

Bhatti noted that from Pakistan's founding in 1947 to 1987, blasphemy was never used as a pretext for communal violence or persecution. Since the law came into being, however, hundreds of people, mostly Christians, have been targeted by extremists who use it to pursue personal vendettas, he explained.

Bhatti said he hopes to amend the law to stop its misuse.

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"These religious extremists are terrorizing everyone who is speaking against blasphemy," he said. "They think speaking against the blasphemy law is also blasphemy."

Bhatti is virtually the only public figure now speaking against the law since the Jan. 4 assassination of the governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, by one of his bodyguards. Taseer had protested the death sentence given to a Christian mother of five, Asia Bibi, who was found guilty of blasphemy. Taseer also supported reform of the law.

The Pakistani government has continued its hard line against any amendments to the law. Bibi's death sentence still holds.

The minister of minorities may face a cabinet shake-up when he returns to Pakistan, but he said he had no concerns about whether he keeps his job.

"I am not political," he said. "I do not consider myself a politician who has a power hunger and hunger for the position.

"I am the advocate and voice of the voiceless minorities in Pakistan," he said.

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