

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

January 8, 2015

Dear Secretary Kerry:

With your upcoming trip to Pakistan, we write you out of deep concern about persistent attacks against religious communities and a general deterioration in respect for freedom of religion or belief that impacts all Pakistanis, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Pakistan is a country of religious diversity. But interfaith harmony, which was the objective of the country's founders, has increasingly been undermined by sectarian attacks on minorities. The attacks raise concerns that extend beyond human rights as they affect Pakistan's stability and ability to govern. The growing climate of impunity, if unchecked, will continue to foster violent religious extremists that threaten the country and the region.

We believe the United States can play a greater role in encouraging the Pakistani government to address this alarming situation through legal reform and better law enforcement. A Pakistan that respects the fundamental freedoms of all its citizens will be more stable and prosperous, a better guarantor of the rights of its citizens, and a stronger partner for the United States. We respectfully urge you to raise these issues in Islamabad, especially highlighting concerns about increasing violence against religious minorities and the use of Pakistan's blasphemy law.

Reports of violent attacks occur regularly. In late December, a member of the Ahmadi community in Gujranwala was shot and killed five days after an extremist cleric called Ahmadis "the enemy" in a rant that appeared aimed at inciting violence against the Ahmadi community on a popular Pakistani television show. The killing of three Pakistanis for blasphemy – two Christians lynched to death by a mob in early November and a Shi'a axed to death by a policeman while in custody – were also graphic reminders of the dangers religious minorities face in Pakistan.

Other recent concerns include the upholding of Aasia Bibi's blasphemy death sentence by the Lahore High Court; the continued incarceration of at least 37 other individuals under blasphemy convictions; unrelenting violence against Shi'a by banned militant groups and terrorists resulting in hundreds of deaths; targeted acts of violence against Christians, such as the 2013 bombing of All Saints Church and the mob burning of over 200 Christian homes outside of Lahore; assaults against Hindus, such as last March's attack on the Hindu temple in Larkana and four other temples elsewhere, as well as abductions and forced conversions of Hindu girls; the murder of American cardiologist Dr. Medhi Ali Qamar, an Ahmadi, and the arson attack on an Ahmadi home that resulted in the burning to death of a grandmother with her grandchildren; and the assassination of attorney Rashid Rehman for defending a Muslim accused of blasphemy. These are just some examples of attacks that have occurred over the past two years.

Unfortunately, the response by the Pakistani government at federal and state levels has been insufficient, if present at all. While governments have occasionally provided reparations after mob attacks, there has been no sustained effort to prosecute the perpetrators and send them to jail. The lack of basic law enforcement, combined with the abusive blasphemy and anti-Ahmadi laws, has created a climate of impunity. And while religious minorities often bear the brunt of this situation, individuals from Pakistan's Muslim majority who attempt to speak out or challenge the negative status quo also face intimidation and violence.

We respectfully urge you to raise these concerns directly with Pakistani leaders and to formulate a systematic response that encourages legal reform, improves police capabilities and law enforcement, and reinforces religious tolerance and interfaith understanding.

More specifically, we call on you to add a plank to the U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue that specifically addresses the issues of countering extremism and promoting interfaith harmony, and to incorporate concerns about attacks by terrorists against religious communities into security consultations. Designating Pakistan as a "country of particular concern" under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act would also express U.S. concerns. USAID assistance should be specifically targeted toward the defense of religious minorities in Pakistan.

Pakistan faces myriad challenges and the U.S. has had a rocky and uneven relationship with this proud country. Yet we must no longer ignore these negative trends. A lasting and deep commitment by our country to help Pakistan confront the rising tide of violent religious extremism and to encourage respect for human rights, not only supports our values, but also our national security goals for the region. In sum, good deeds make for good policies.

With High Regards,

Mr. Mustafa Akhwand, Shia Rights Watch

Dr. Jonah Blank, George Washington University

Dr. Stephen P. Cohen, Brookings Institution

Ms. Lisa Curtis, Heritage Foundation

Dr. C. Christine Fair, Georgetown University

Dr. Frederic Grare, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Ambassador Husain Haqqani, Hudson Institute

Dr. Robert M. Hathaway, Woodrow Wilson International Center

Ms. Farahnaz Ispahani, former Member of Pakistani Parliament

Mr. Samir Kalra, Hindu American Foundation

Mr. Jay Kansara, Hindu American Foundation

Mr. Amjad Mahmood Khan, Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA

Ambassador William B. Milam, Woodrow Wilson International Center

Ms. Polly Nayak, Independent Consultant

Mr. Bruce Riedel, Brookings Institution

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Dr. Marvin G. Weinbaum, Middle East Institute

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*This letter reflects the views of the individual signatories; institutional affiliations are listed for the purpose of identification only.

cc.

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Dr. Shaun Casey, Special Representative, Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives, U.S. State Department

Mr. Daniel F. Feldman, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, U.S. State Department

Mr. Tom Malinowski, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. State Department

Mr. Steven Pomper, Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights, National Security Staff