

Opposition From Muslim Extremists Doesn't Deter Pakistani Evangelist

Shahbaz Bhatti preaches the gospel and champions human rights causes despite pending threats from Muslim extremists

For the determined Shahbaz Bhatti, living for Jesus is all about being willing to die for Him. In his quest to bring freedom to religious minorities in Pakistan, Bhatti has become a living target, dodging threats and even bullets from Muslim extremists in Pakistan.

"During those attacks on my life, I did not use a gun or take any gun with me," Bhatti told Charisma. "I only believe in God's Spirit and God's power. He's guiding me, giving me courage, giving me wisdom and showing me the right way."

It's this resolve that

has led the 30-year-old Pakistani Christian to become the leading voice for non-Muslim minorities in Pakistan through Christian Liberation Front Pakistan (CLFP), the largest human rights organization within Pakistan with 50,000 members.

"CLFP believes in peaceful struggle through democratic lines," Bhatti said. "We are the umbrella of all the religious community in Pakistan."

In May Bhatti was called to help eight Christian women, seven of them teen-agers, who were gang-raped when their van was forced off the road as they returned from work at a stitching

factory. The Muslim women were left unharmed.

After the local police officials refused to file charges against the assailants, families of the women called on Bhatti for help.

Bhatti presented the case to higher government officials who arrested the four suspects, reported by the country's National Daily newspaper to be Muslim extremists. Since the arrests, the assailants' families have issued threats against the victims in efforts to

persuade them to drop their case.

On average, only 1 percent to 5 percent of Pakistan's 90 percent Muslim population are Muslim extremists. They are a small group of religious hard-liners who want to implement total Islamization of Pakistan, train zealous youth in jihad (holy war) against non-Muslims and unite Muslims of the world against non-Muslim countries.

Muslim extremists' intentions can be documented directly from graffiti written illegally across walls near schools and housing developments. The signs lure zealous young men to join Muslim extremists.

Steve Snyder, president of the U.S. religious human rights organization International Christian Concern, has photocopies of graffiti signs in Pakistan that are written on a wall in front of a school with a contact name and phone number.

"If Islam is a complete faith then why beg from the tyrannical West? Contact us for 21 days of training for jihad," the

writing states.

Though small in number, Muslim extremists raise a threatening cry because they are well-organized, well-linked, and backed by other Islamic countries. According to new statistics provided by churches within Pakistan, religious minorities including Christians and Hindus, Muslim off-shoot sects such as the Ahmadis and Zikris now make up approximately 10 percent of Pakistan's 161 million people.

Like their 19th-century ancestors who were converted from Hinduism, most Pakistani Christians perform menial tasks as street sweepers and toilet cleaners and often are ostracized by the higher caste people in Pakistan.

Christian women often work cleaning waste from the homes and animal stalls of Muslims. They also are kidnapped by Muslim extremists, raped and forced to convert to Islam. After a woman converts to Islam, a Muslim man will marry the woman. Christian parents or husbands who come to rescue the women are stopped by Muslim kidnappers and police authorities.

As a result, Christian homes are broken, and the children are left destitute without their mothers. If the woman or her relatives raise their voices against the brutality, the new Muslim husband often will threaten to kill the woman's family. This shattering of the Christian family is probably the most troublesome suffering endured by Pakistani Christians.

CLFP plans to sponsor the International Conference on Peace and Human Rights in South Asia Dec. 9-10 in Islamabad, Pakistan. Various international governments, human rights organizations and the United Nations High Commission for Human

Rights are scheduled to attend the conference, hoping to create long-term strategies for human rights and peace in South Asia.

"We'll make recommendations to the governments of South Asia for improvement of human rights," Bhatti said. Although he holds masters' degrees in both public administration and political science, Bhatti owns only two suits and lives in a small rented apartment.

As a leader for religious rights in Pakistan, Bhatti frequents many different religious gatherings. However, he enjoys personal fellowship in the charismatic-style house churches that, he says, are growing rapidly in Pakistan.

"I saw the miseries in my country of my Christian brothers and sisters," Bhatti said. If Jesus can sacrifice His own life for us, why can't we? If anyone kills me, or you see I'm in prison, it's because of my faith, and I'm ready to accept these things."