

Suspected Islamists Kill Pakistan's Christian Cabinet Member

Unidentified gunmen in Islamabad today shot dead Federal Minister for Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's only cabinet-level Christian and an outspoken critic of the country's widely condemned "blasphemy" laws.

Suspected Islamic extremists from Pakistan's Taliban and al Qaeda reportedly left a letter at the scene saying those who try to change Pakistan's blasphemy laws would be killed. The murder comes two months after Punjab Gov. Salman Taseer was killed by his bodyguard for supporting Asia Noreen (also known as Asia Bibi), the first Christian woman sentenced to death in Pakistan on blasphemy charges.

The assailants sprayed 25 to 30 bullets at Bhatti's car after he came out of his mother's home in a residential area of the Pakistani capital to attend a meeting of the federal cabinet. The federal government had provided bodyguards for Bhatti, but they were not present at the time of the attack.

A letter found at the scene, purportedly from Pakistani Taliban and al Qaeda terrorists, claimed responsibility for the killing. Police sources said the letter found at the murder site accused Bhatti of waging a campaign to amend the blasphemy law.

"Bhatti, a Christian, was in charge of a committee set up to amend the law against blasphemy," the letter stated. "This is his fate. We will not spare anybody involved in acts of blasphemy."

Police are investigating the letter's authenticity.

Islamabad Police Chief Wajid Durrani said three or four armed men in a white Suzuki car intercepted Bhatti's official vehicle.

"The attackers were clad in shawls and fired bursts on him, killing him instantly," Durrani said.

Bhatti, a 42-year-old bachelor, was dead on arrival at Islamabad's Shifa Hospital, according to Dr. Azmatullah Qureshi.

Durrani insisted that Bhatti had been provided with proper security but said the minister was not accompanied by his bodyguards when the attack happened at around 11 a.m.

"The squad officer told me that the minister had directed him to wait for him at his office," Durrani claimed. "He used to often visit his mother's house without a squad."

Bhatti's driver, Gul Sher, told police at least one gunman had taken part in the attack.

"A white car stopped near us at a crossing," said Gul, who was slightly injured in the shootout. "Four people were sitting in the car. One of them got out with a Kalashnikov ... He came in front of the car and opened fire. I ducked. Minister died on the spot."

Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani visited the hospital and offered condolences to Bhatti's grieving relatives.

"Such acts will not deter the government's resolve to fight terrorism and extremism," he said.

A senior TV anchorperson, however, told Compass by phone from Islamabad that the late minister had expressed dissatisfaction over the security provided to him by the Islamabad police.

"Bhatti told me that he had repeatedly asked the government to provide him a house in the high-security Red Zone area of the

federal capital, where most of the government ministers have been provided accommodation, but he was told there was no vacant house at the moment and he would have to wait,” said the TV journalist.

Bhatti had defied death threats after the Jan. 4 assassination of Taseer, conceding in several interviews at the time that he was “the highest target right now” but vowing to continue his work and trusting his life to God.

Last month, in an interview with the Pakistan Christian Post, Bhatti said he had received threats.

“I received a call from the Taliban commander and he said, ‘If you will bring any changes in the blasphemy law and speak on this issue, then you will be killed,’” Bhatti told the newspaper. “I don’t believe that bodyguards can save me after the assassination [of Taseer]. I believe in the protection from heaven.”

In a recent interview with the BBC, Bhatti had said he was “ready to die for a cause” as a Christian.

“I am living for my community and suffering people, and I will die to defend their rights,” he said. “These threats and warnings cannot change my opinion and principles.”

Bhatti was born on Sept. 9, 1968 in Lahore, Punjab. He joined the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) in 2002 and was elected a Member of the National Assembly on a reserved seat for minorities. He was made Federal Minister for Minorities in 2008 and again included in the federal cabinet with the same portfolio last month, making him the first Christian to take charge of the ministry.

Bhatti also received the International Religious Freedom Award for rendering services to the Christian community, becoming the first Pakistani to receive this award.

Controversy over the controversial legislation flared both within Pakistan and internationally after Asia Noreen, a mother of two and step-mother to three others, was convicted and sentenced to death last year for blaspheming against Islam's prophet Muhammad.

Politicians and radical clerics in Pakistan have been at loggerheads over whether Noreen should be pardoned. But following Taseer's death, the government made it clear it does not support reform of the blasphemy law.

Amir Rana, director at the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, said the attack was not unexpected.

"This kind of attack was expected after the government's response to Governor Taseer's assassination," Rana said. "Because of the government's very weak response ... it has encouraged the hardliners in society."

Napolean Qayyum, a leader of the Minorities Wing of the ruling Pakistan People's Party, appealed to President Asif Zardari, who is also the co-chairman of the PPP, to fulfill his promise of giving the minorities their "due rights" and protection from extremist elements.

"For centuries the Christians have been supporting Muslims in their time of need, but we are still being marginalized and persecuted for our faith," Qayyum said.

Asif Aqeel, executive director of the Community Development Initiative, an affiliate of the European Center for Law and Justice, said Bhatti was a hero for the Pakistani Christian community.

"We salute his valor and courage for standing against extremism and terrorism, unarmed and only equipped with his ideal of freedom and human dignity," Aqeel said. "We are thoroughly indebted to his service to Pakistan and the Christian community. His death has shown how little space is

left for argument and for religious minorities, who are seen as a foreign element in this 'land of pure.'”

Condemnations also flowed in from around the world, calling for more protection for the religious minorities in Pakistan.

The Vatican joined the Anglican Church, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, and Archbishop of York John Sentamu in condemning the incident.

“This further instance of sectarian bigotry and violence will increase anxiety worldwide about the security of Christians and other religious minorities in Pakistan,” they said in a statement issued to Pakistani media.