

Bhatti Assassination Shines Light on Pakistani Persecution

The world's eyes shifted from the revolution in the Middle East to the broad daylight assassination of Pakistan's only Christian cabinet member in Islamabad on Wednesday. Hundreds of protesters flooded the streets of Islamabad demanding justice.

Before escaping the scene of the crime—and after firing as many as 30 bullets at Shahbaz Bhatti's vehicle—the assassins made sure the world knew why the Federal Minister for Minorities was targeted.

Indeed, leaflets left behind made it clear that Bhatti was paying the price for opposing Pakistan's blasphemy law that makes criticizing Mohammed or Islam a crime punishable by death.

In an interview with the Pakistan Christian Post last month, 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 protection from heaven." And in a recent interview with the BBC, Bhatti had said he was "ready to die for a cause" as a Christian.

President Obama condemned the attack immediately, as did Dr. Fehmida Mirza, Speaker and Faisal Karim Kundi, Deputy Speaker National Assembly of Pakistan. In separate statements both Pakistani government officials expressed their profound grief and sorrow over Bhatti's murder and called on law enforcement agencies to apprehend the culprits and bring them to justice.

Meanwhile, the Christian community is shocked and enraged at the assassination.

“This is a terrible tragedy. Shahbaz Bhatti was my friend, and I am shocked and deeply grieved by his death. He was one of the most courageous men I know,” says IRD Religious Liberty Director Faith J.H. McDonnell. “Bhatti spent his life as an advocate for Pakistan’s beleaguered Christians and other minorities that live in the misery under Pakistan’s Islamic supremacism. Now, with his murder, the Christians and other vulnerable minorities are left with no voice in the government of Pakistan. For Bhatti’s sake, we must be more vigilant than ever to intercede for them.”

Shahbaz is the second high ranking government official to be killed for opposing blasphemy laws. On January 4, Islamists murdered Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab province, for criticizing the country’s blasphemy law and calling for the release of Asia Bibi.

“It is heartrending to receive this news, but it is unfortunately not unexpected. The last time I was with Shahbaz in 2010, I asked him about his security and if the Islamists were closing in,” says Jeff King, president of International Christian Concern (ICC). “He had lived under the cloud of this eventuality for many years and he knew he was on borrowed time. He was a close friend of ICC and started working with us helping Pakistan’s persecuted Christians in the 1990’s. We will dearly miss him. He courageously defended the rights of persecuted Christians in Pakistan despite living under the constant threat of death. He died as a martyr for a cause he believed in.”

Dr. Carl Moeller, president and CEO of Open Doors USA, called the assassination a cowardly act and another blow against religious tolerance for Christians and all minorities in Pakistan. As he sees it, Muslim extremists are determined to purge the country of anyone supporting the release of Asia and

the possible repeal of the blasphemy laws.

“Unfortunately, Pakistan is becoming a country of martyrs,” Moeller says. “I plead for Christians to unite in prayer for the situation in Pakistan and the toll it is taking on Christians and other minorities. God answers prayers in a mighty way—just last week Christian aid worker Said Musa was released from prison in Afghanistan after concerted prayer.”

Moeller says some of the prayer requests include:

- Comfort for the Bhatti family in this time of mourning for loss of a loved one
- New Christian leaders will rise up to fill the vacuum of the assassinations of Bhatti and Taseer
- Christians will not let fear dominate their lives, but remain strong in the faith
- The perpetrators of the assassinations will be brought to justice, and the Lord will work in their hearts to seek forgiveness
- Blasphemy laws in Pakistan and in other Muslim-dominated countries will be overturned.

The Pakistani Taliban and Al-Qaeda are rumored to be responsible for the slaying of Bhatti, who worked to defend the rights of Christians and other non-Muslims, as well as Muslims victimized by the blasphemy law.