

Uproar Follows Assassination of Christian Minister in Pakistan

✖ An advocate for Christians in Pakistan will be laid to rest today, and the government is observing three days of mourning.

Even as Pakistan's clerics and other senior leaders condemned Wednesday's assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti, Christians took to the streets in Lahore, expressing their ire.

Bhatti was the federal minister of minority affairs, as well as the only Christian in the cabinet. Anger stirred over the lack of protection for those championing the cause of the oppressed Christians.

By Thursday, demonstrations were held across Punjab, where Governor Salman Taseer was murdered in January. Both were outspoken opponents of the controversial blasphemy law, and both had faced down death threats to keep speaking out about the injustices of the law.

However, other politicians may be afraid of speaking out on the blasphemy law, which is now politically toxic and potentially life-threatening.

Peter Howard, Director of Relief for Food for the Hungry, says as part of their response to the flooding last August, they have been partnering with the Interfaith League Against Poverty (ILAP) in the Punjab area.

The recent events make a challenging environment for their team. "An assassination like this puts a real damper on the kind of work we're doing as Food for the Hungry, and many other organizations, who are in Pakistan trying to serve the

needs of the poor and to bring a message of peace.”

Because Christians have been most frequently targeted by the blasphemy law, could the hostility toward them increase the likelihood of disruptions in their ministry? Howard says, “The risk is there. Our local partner is very savvy and understands the local context and culture. As Food for the Hungry, we try to work locally through partners. They’re being very careful in how they’re going about their work, but they’re also continuing to move forward because the only way to break down these barriers and this mistrust that leads to this kind of violence is to keep engaging.”

Howard adds that people too often confuse Christians with the politics of the country. It makes the requirement for a credible local face (like ILAP) even more important. “One of our goals, again, is to represent the true face of Christianity. I think often people in Pakistan might think of Christians as a political force and as ‘against’ them. We want to show them that we’re followers of Jesus, and we’re there to help.”

Even as the nation reels from the violence and the threat of even more, Howard says their team is moving forward. There’s too much at stake to leave unfinished. Pray for wisdom. Also, “As far as prayer for those who are in Pakistan serving in the name of Christ, [pray for] protection and that Christians will represent truly the message of Christ which is a message of peace, and that Christianity will be separate from politics, because I think that’s when it gets messy.”