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One Hundred and Fifteenth Congress
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

November 14, 2017

The Honorable Rex Tillerson
Secretary of State
U.S Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington DC 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson,

As Co-Chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC), we welcomed the release of the 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom in August. In light of the information presented, we write today to urge you to designate Pakistan a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) this year. The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) mandates that such a designation shall be made for countries that have engaged in systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom. According to the State Department, examples of such violations include “degrading treatment or punishment, prolonged detention without charges, abduction or clandestine detention, or other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons.” We are certain that the evidence collected by the State Department and other independent observers more than amply justifies a CPC designation for Pakistan.

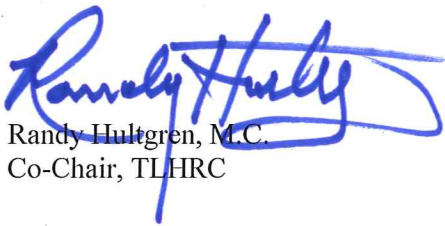
The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has advocated for designating Pakistan as a CPC since 2002, noting recently that the government of Pakistan continues “to perpetrate and tolerate systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. Religiously discriminatory constitutional provisions and legislation, such as the country’s blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, continue to result in prosecutions and imprisonments.” They also noted that religious minority communities are subject to sectarian violence, and that the Pakistani government’s longstanding failure to prevent or prosecute such violence has created a deep-rooted climate of impunity that has emboldened extremists. In a report released this year, the Pew Research Center determined that over an eight-year period Pakistan is one of a small group of countries that “stand out as having the most restrictions on religion ... when both government restrictions and religious hostilities are taken into account.”

In fact, all respected sources concur on these basic facts: the government of Pakistan has engaged in severe repression of religious freedom for many years, and there are no signs that the repression will lessen or end. These are not isolated instances, but are due to intrinsic failings of Pakistani legal and governmental systems that have continued unabated across multiple governments and under various ruling parties for decades, with no major politicians within Pakistan willing to forcefully advocate for changing the status quo.

As you noted at the August launch of this year's State Department International Religious Freedom (IRF) report, "religious freedom is under attack in Pakistan, where more than two dozen are on death row or serving a life imprisonment for blasphemy." One such prisoner is Asia Bibi. Asia is a Catholic mother of five. In 2010 a district court sentenced her to death for blasphemy, the first such sentence for blasphemy handed down against a woman in Pakistan. In the last year, Pakistani courts put Asia's appeal on hold indefinitely. The TLHRC sponsors Asia as part of the Defending Freedoms Project, which supports prisoners of conscience around the world.

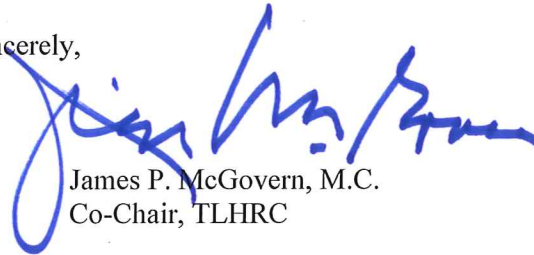
In August, you also correctly noted that in Pakistan "the government marginalizes Ahmadiyya Muslims, and refuses to recognize them as Muslim." Pakistan tolerates horrific acts of religiously motivated and sectarian violence against Ahmadiyya and other religious minorities, such as Shia, routinely failing to prevent or punish such violence. Prosecution of the perpetrators of such acts is the exception, not the norm.

Successive U.S. administrations of both parties have held Pakistan forward as a strong regional ally in the fight against religiously motivated terrorism, but alliances are most effective when they are based on common values and mutual honesty. We should be honest with Pakistan about their failings: the Pakistani government's abuses of religious freedom in its own country only serve to discredit it – and by extension, its partner, the United States – in the fight against the Taliban, ISIS, the Haqqani network and other extremist terror groups in the region. Absent pressure from the United States in the form of a CPC designation, there is little reason to believe that the climate for religious freedom will improve in Pakistan. Designating Pakistan as a CPC is not just a moral imperative, it is a legally-mandated one under IRFA, and it can only enhance U.S. credibility around the world as a defender of religious freedom and opponent of extremist violence.



Randy Hultgren, M.C.
Co-Chair, TLHRC

Sincerely,



James P. McGovern, M.C.
Co-Chair, TLHRC