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QUESTION OF THE VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS
IN ANY PART OF THE WORLD

Written statement* submitted by Pax Christi International, a non-governmental
organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 January 2003]

*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

CONDEMNATION OF RELIGION-BASED VIOLENCE IN PAKISTAN

Pax Christi, the international Catholic peace movement, wishes to draw the attention of members of the 59th United Nations Human Rights Commission to the violence to which the minority Christian community in Pakistan has been subjected throughout the year 2002.

Institutions devoted to serving Pakistani society, deserving protection and security, such as a school, a hospital, churches and a social service organisation, have been targeted for violent attacks. Seven such attacks took place in less than 14 months, starting with Bahawalpur, in Southern Punjab, where 16 people were killed and 40 were injured on 28 October 2001, when they were busy praying in the Church on a Sunday morning. On 17 March 2002, a grenade was thrown into a church in Islamabad. Five persons were killed and 45 injured.

In August 2002, two attacks carried out in quick succession left members of the community with a sense of helplessness. A school run by the minority community in Murree was attacked on August 5 where six people were gunned down. Immediately thereafter, on August 9, four nurses were killed and many more injured when a hospital in Taxila was targeted for attack. Then on 25 September, seven members of the staff of a social service organisation IDARA-E-AMAN-O-INSAF (Committee for Justice and Peace) at Karachi were shot at point blank range after being bound and gagged. Another hands grenade attack was carried out on October 4, 2002, nobody was hurt luckily.

Members of the community as well as organisations within and outside Pakistan have called on the government of Pakistan to ensure a full investigation into all these attacks. Seven persons were arrested in connection with the attack in Bahawalpur however, there was no court trail and the accused were killed in police encounters according to the Pakistan media (on March 11 and July 28, 2002). Similarly death of three suspects was reported after the attack in Murree but there has been no clear investigation and trail of the persons responsible for these attacks.

Repeated appeals to ensure the security of institutions connected to the minority community have failed to see results, despite government reassurances of more assistance in this matter. Pax Christi International shares the concern of members of the minority community that it is this failure on the part of the government that has created a climate of impunity which in turn resulted in yet another attack on 24 December 2002 on a church in Chianwala, a village in Daska township. Three young girls were killed and 11 wounded, most of them were women and girls. The following day, fourth injured died in the Hospital and three injured lost their one or both eyes.

All these incidents point to a general apathy to safety of the non-Muslim citizens however the police failed badly to conduct a proper investigation in incidents at Karachi and Daska. The local Imam identified as responsible for waging a hate campaign against the Christian minority was able to get favours at investigation because of his affiliation to a religio-political party. This party also used the local media in a bid to implicate the Christian community saying that the attack was due to an internal conflict among the congregation. The propaganda could not succeed because the Christians are totally peaceful community and great majority of people

did not accept this false accusation.

Pax Christi is concerned that this unprecedented violence against members of a Pakistani minority community exacerbates deep feelings of insecurity in a community already adversely affected by harmful legislation, such as the blasphemy law of Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code.

On 7 May 2002, Aslam Masih was sentenced to a double life imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 100,000 on the charge of blasphemy. On 29 June, Kingri Masih was sentenced to death under the same charge and fined Rs. 50,000. A number of persons have been killed after being accused under blasphemy laws, most recently it was Zahid Shah of Chak Jhumra and Yousaf Ali of Lahore. The former was stoned to death the later was shot dead in Kot Lakhpat Jail by another inmate. Therefore, the blasphemy laws does not protect the life of the accused as argued by the proponents, rather contrary to this, the law has created impunity for those who want to eliminate liberals and moderates Muslims like Justice Arif Iqbal Bhatti, murdered in 1997 for setting the blasphemy accused free.

This laws has been proven to be discriminatory and prone to (mis) use in personal jealousy vendettas etc. Cases of Ayub Masih, Naimat Ahmer and Manzoor Masih, and many other cases prove that the law fails to address the issue of motive and intention of an act charged to be an offence. Ignoring this important aspect of the criminal justice has made the laws (Section 295 B &C, 298 A, B, & C) technically redundant and highly prone to abuse.

Pax Christi International welcomes subsequent acquittal of many accused by the Supreme Court High courts in Pakistan but we concerned that the blasphemy law continues to be reason for displacement of persons, problems of personal security and social conflicts with little action on the part of the government to prevent this. Pax Christi International believes that attacks on these institutions, which serve the minority community as well as wider Pakistani society, are indicative of the government's failure to ensure the safety and welfare of its citizens. Moreover, the failure to bring the perpetrators of attacks, to justice during 2002, perpetuates the belief that such acts of senseless violence can go unpunished. We regret the Pakistani government's failure to uphold these basic rights of its citizens.

Pax Christi International reiterates that it is the responsibility of the Government of Pakistan to guarantee the security of all civic and welfare organisations as well as that of all citizens of Pakistan, irrespective of their religious affiliation. Where Pakistani citizens and civic organisations from the minority communities seem to be particularly vulnerable to violent acts, the government is obliged to take urgent and comprehensive measures to guarantee their safety and security.

Pax Christi International calls upon the Commission on Human Rights to recommend that:

- Pakistan should demonstrate its commitment to its citizenry by establishing a high level judicial inquiry into religion-based violence, which will successfully bring the

perpetrators of these crimes to justice. Protection must also be ensured to eyewitnesses to the attacks and to those whose lives will remain under constant threat.

- Pakistan reaffirm and ensure the right of all its citizen to live in a society free of fear, insecurity and discrimination and take decisive action to guarantee the security of those communities most vulnerable to attack.

- Pakistan should take immediate action to amend its Penal Code to ensure that the blasphemy law is not used to victimise vulnerable members of the community.

In international settings, the government has repeatedly confirmed his commitment of support to the “War Against Terrorism.” We remind the government of the first responsibility to the citizens of its own country to ensure that the innocent do not become victims of any such terrorist campaign. All citizens of Pakistan, regardless of religion, sex or class, have a right to live in peace, security and freedom from all forms of intimidation.
