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June 6, 2003

Posted: 6/06/03

Pakistani Christians under increased threat, activists warn

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WASHINGTON (ABP)-Pakistan's minority Christians are under increasing threat because they are lumped together with America in the minds of Islamic extremists, according to a leading Christian human-rights activist in the country.

The Pakistani leader, who chose not to have his name revealed for fear of repercussions against him and his family, spoke with reporters in Washington, D.C.

Akram Duurrani, chief minister of the North West Frontier Province, attends the assembly session in Peshawar June 3, while Islamic fundamentalists ruling the NWFP in Pakistan said they would segregate universities and urge men to grow beards after imposing traditional sharia law.

(REUTERS/Faisal Mahmood Photo)

He appeared in a special invitation-only press briefing arranged by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. The man was in Washington to meet with commission representatives as well as administration officials and advocacy groups regarding religious freedom in Pakistan.

"The religious minorities of Pakistan--especially the Christian minority--fear attack," he told reporters. Islamic extremists often think they are engaging in holy war by attacking local Christians, he said. The extremists "think

that, by attacking and killing Pakistani Christians, they are taking revenge against the West and America."

There has been a dramatic rise in anti-Christian and anti-Western violence in the nation since U.S. and coalition forces began military activities in neighboring Afghanistan after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Besides the highly publicized 2002 kidnapping and murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl—who was forced by his killers to “confess” his Judaism on videotape—more than 20 major incidents of violence against individual Christians or Christian churches, institutions or communities have been documented by the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance.

The most recent took place May 5, when a bomb exploded at a Christian hospital in the nation's Northwest Frontier Province—the location of many of the incidents.

Altogether the attacks have killed about 40 Christians and injured more than 100. The most-publicized incidents include an October 2001 gun assault during Sunday morning mass at a Catholic church in Bahawalpur that left 16 dead and a March 2002 bombing that killed five worshippers at the Protestant International Church in Islamabad.

Government officials have not successfully prosecuted anyone in the anti-Christian attacks.

The commission has noted many official abuses of religious freedom under the government of Pakistan's head of state, Gen. Pervez Musharraf. Among them are a law that makes blasphemy against Islam a capital offense and court rules that create unequal treatment between Muslims and other religious minorities in both civil and criminal cases.

Because of these and the seeming unwillingness to prosecute Muslims for crimes against Christians, the commission asked the State Department to

declare Pakistan a Country of Particular Concern—a diplomatic designation for particularly severe violators of religious freedom. So far, administration officials have declined to label Pakistan as such.

The Pakistani leader also pointed to evidence of a rise in crimes against Christian women in the months since the U.S. began build-up for the war in Iraq. In particular, women and girls—some as young as 9—have been beaten, kidnapped, gang-raped, disfigured and forced to convert to Islam at gun- or knife-point, he said.

The man said one 9-year-old Pakistani Christian girl named Razia Masih, who worked as a live-in maid in the home of a Muslim family, was beaten and tortured when news of the U.S. attack on Iraq reached the household. When she took her case to court, “She was told by the (judge), ‘You are Christian and infidel, and we will take revenge on you for bombing of Iraqi children,’” the leader said.

Felice Gaer, chair of the Commission on International Religious Freedom, said those examples were “disturbing evidence” for why the commission asked the State Department to designate Pakistan a country of concern.

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