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Excerpts from the Statement by Rep. Chris Smith
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
Religious Freedom in Pakistan
October 8, 2009

I would like to thank the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for holding this timely hearing on religious freedom in Pakistan.

Just three weeks ago, I had the extraordinary privilege of meeting the Pakistani Minister of Minorities Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti. He is the first cabinet level official to be appointed in Pakistan to protect the rights of minorities as envisioned under the 1973 Pakistan Constitution. Minister Bhatti earned his position through years of determined advocacy on behalf of the minorities of Pakistan. Before he was appointed to his current position, Mr. Bhatti survived three assassination attempts and was imprisoned for speaking out against the blasphemy law that is used to discriminate and even justify violence against minorities, particularly Christians. And under a prior government, he was prevented from travelling internationally because he was informing the outside world about the persecution of Christians and others in Pakistan.

The Minorities Minister was in Washington, D.C. to receive an award from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for championing the rights of minorities in the Islamic state. His current activities certainly make him deserving of such an award. Mr. Bhatti has initiated a program for interfaith harmony, and plans to visit madrasas – Islamic religious schools – together with a team of Imams to speak to students about religious freedom issues. He is planning an inter-religious conference that he hopes will result in the adoption of a declaration of equality of religions. And the Minister is reaching out to provide help to individuals, as well. He has established a 24-hour hotline that anyone can call to report a case of religious persecution.

Perhaps the most daunting task that Mr. Bhatti is undertaking is the repeal of the blasphemy law, which punishes any offense against religion and anyone trying to convert others. Mr. Bhatti claims that this law is a tool in the hands of extremists. In my meeting with him, the Minister gave me a first-hand account of the violence that occurred in early August in the Punjabi city of Gorja as a result of the blasphemy law. The unrest started when members of a banned Muslim organization accused Christians in the city of defiling the Koran – an accusation that Mr. Bhatti says was false. This led to hundreds of

radical Muslims burning the homes of Christians and killing at least six Christians, including four women and a child.

Minister Bhatti and the Pakistani Government need the moral support of the United States to pursue their efforts to establish religious harmony in the country. It is in our own interest to provide such support, not only for the primary cause of promoting human rights, but also to ensure the stability of this important ally by establishing a tolerant society that precludes militancy and terrorism.

As an expression of this support, I, together with my good friend and colleague Jim McGovern, have introduced H.Res. 764, which emphasizes the importance of inter-religious dialogue and the protection of religious freedom in Pakistan. This resolution proposes several concrete measures to ensure respect for religious freedom. It calls for the strengthening of institutions crucial to Pakistan's democratic development, support for exchange programs with the United States, and the establishment of textbook and curriculum standards that promote respect for diverse religious beliefs.

The resolution stresses the importance of protecting the religious freedom of all Pakistanis, preventing religiously motivated and sectarian violence, and the punishment of the perpetrators of such violence. Finally, H. Res. 764 urges the Government of Pakistan to repeal its blasphemy law, and to review other legislation that restricts religious freedom or that constitutes discrimination on the basis of religion or belief, contrary to international human rights standards.

Steps are being taken to achieve these goals. Just last week, the House joined the Senate in approving a tripling of current aid to Pakistan to \$1.5 billion per year over the next five years for democratic, social and development programs, including the promotion of religious freedom and the protection of ethnic and religious minorities. I was pleased to see that Mr. Bhatti was able to join Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari during his meeting with Pope Benedict XVI last Thursday, during which the Pope emphasized the need to overcome all forms of discrimination based on religious affiliation in Pakistan, with the aim of promoting respect for the rights of all citizens. And last month, the Pakistani president publicly stated that his government will ensure that the blasphemy law is not misused, and some sectors of the Pakistani press recently called for the law's repeal.

But more voices and efforts are necessary. The passage of H. Res. 764 will be an important contribution to this end, as well as this hearing and the testimony of our distinguished panel.