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August 31, 2012

His Excellency Asif Al Zardari
President
Islamic Republic of Pakistan
Islamabad, Pakistan

Dear Mr. President:

We write to express our serious concerns about discrimination and violence against religious minorities in Pakistan and the application of Pakistan's blasphemy law to minority religious communities. We urge you to take immediate action to ensure the protection and equitable treatment of all Pakistani citizens, regardless of their religion.

As you know, last week a young, mentally-disabled Christian girl, Rimsha Masih, was taken into custody in Islamabad for allegedly burning pages inscribed with verses from the holy Qur'an and was charged with blasphemy – a crime that could be punishable by life in prison or death. The mere allegation has forced Christians to flee her neighborhood due to fear of retribution. We have welcomed the efforts of Dr. Paul Bhatti, the Prime Minister's Advisor on Interfaith Harmony, to aid the girl and her family and avoid violence. However, we remain deeply concerned that the law continues to victimize innocent people. We urge your government to do more to prevent abuse, as blasphemy allegations have resulted in the lengthy detention of, and violence committed against, Christians, Ahmadis, Hindus and other religious minorities, as well as members of the Muslim majority community.

Other religious freedom abuses raise further concerns about the protection of religious minorities. Hundreds of Hindus are fleeing Pakistan due to growing religious intolerance in the country. Among the acts alleged by Hindus leaving the country are harassment, theft, rape, kidnapping and forced conversion. Members of the Ahmadi community also continue to experience acts of murder, violence and discrimination, as do Shia Muslims.

While we do not condone the destruction of any religious document or artifact or the defamation of any religion, the application of Pakistan's blasphemy laws undermines the State's obligation to protect the rights of all religious groups in Pakistan and in fact has repeatedly been used to harass and intimidate members of minority religious groups.

Discrimination, violence, and persecution on the basis of religion are a direct affront to the fundamental values of freedom and personal choice our nations subscribed to as signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It provides that "[e]veryone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth" in the Declaration "without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion...." It further provides that "[e]veryone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion...." These violations run counter to the Pakistani constitution

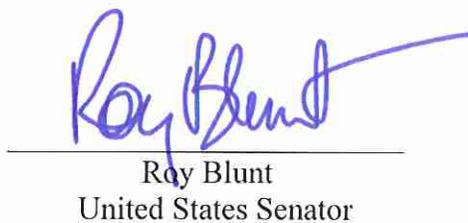
and the vision of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, when he stated “you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place or worship in this State of Pakistan.”

We hope that your government will undertake a serious effort to address these specific issues of discrimination against minority religious communities, as well as undertake reforms to ensure that the rights of all in Pakistan are adequately protected. Additionally, we ask for an end to the unjust imprisonment of Ms. Masih and to ensure the protection of Mr. Bhatti. We appreciate your attention to these matters and look forward to working with you in the future.

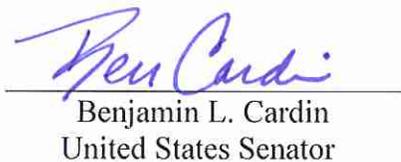
Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



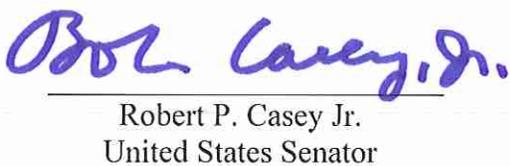
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