

# Shahbaz Bahtti: Pakistan's Christian Leader Buried In His Native Village

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On March 4, thousands of Christians and Muslims gathered in Khushpur, a Christian village in the Punjab province of Pakistan, at the funeral of late Shahbaz Bahtti. Young boys were beating their chests and women wailed in grief during the burial ceremony. Shahbaz Bhatti, Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs, was killed by unknown assassins on March 2 in Islamabad. Bhatti, a Christian, was the second target of the Pakistani extremists after governor of Punjab province, Salman Taseer, 64, who was shot dead on Jan. 4 by one of his own bodyguards.

Bhatti, the only Christian minister in Pakistani cabinet, had received numerous death threats over recent months. After the murder of governor Taseer his life was constantly under risk. His close friends advised Bhatti to leave Pakistan for a period because of threats, but he had refused. Even he predicted his own death weeks before. "There is very little doubt that Bhatti was killed by the same elements those killed governor Taseer," said Group Captain (retired) Cecil Chaudhry, a Christian leader and national war hero. In 2009 during a conference in London said, "This position [as Minister] cannot change my determination to pursue justice, because I live for religious freedom and I am ready to die for this cause."

Bhatti was reportedly killed by the militants because he had been campaigning to bring changes in the controversial blasphemy laws to minimise the misuse of these laws against innocent people, including Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, Shias and Sunni Muslims as well. During the last few months, the minister received written letters and messages from Islamic militants, warning him to stop campaigning against the blasphemy laws.

The attack was carried out in Islamabad, capital of Pakistan, by a group of masked men who ambushed the minister on the street. They pulled him out of his car and opened fire at point blank range before fleeing in a car. Bhatti was shot dead when he left for cabinet meeting from his mother's house. According to the police sources, there were 4 gunmen in a car waiting at the corner of his street. The terrorists continued to fire for about two minutes. He shot eight times and before reaching to the nearby Alshifa Hospital he died.

There was no security guard with Bhatti when the attack occurred. During the last months, at numerous occasions he had expressed dissatisfaction over the security provided to him by the Islamabad police.

Suspected Islamic extremists from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) reportedly left a pamphlet at the scene saying those who try to change Pakistan's blasphemy laws would be killed. "This is his fate. We will not spare anybody involved in acts of blasphemy." They blamed the government for putting Bhatti, an "infidel Christian," in charge of an unspecified committee, apparently in reference to his support for changing the blasphemy laws. "With the blessing of Allah, the mujahedeen will send each of you to hell," said the pamphlet, which did not name any other targets. However, the Prime Minister publically denied that there is any such committee was constituted. He promised the religious leader that the government has no intention to change the blasphemy laws.

The identity of Bhatti's killers was unknown, but Islamabad police registered an FIR (First Information Report) against 4 unknown people on Minister's brother Sikandar Bhatti's complaint. Police also released a sketch of an alleged killer.

Bhatti was the second Pakistani Christian who holds the federal ministerial position. J. Salik was the first Pakistani Christian who was inducted by late Benazir Bhutto in the federal cabinet.

As his assassination's news spread, Christians and human rights activists hold protest rallies throughout the country against extremism and terrorism. Christians believed that they are now even in more difficult situation and vulnerable position. They said, "We are in a state of shock. We feel bewildered and defenceless. We are living in a climate of fear. Now who will fight for our rights?" "This murder means that the Country is at the mercy of terrorists, who can afford to kill high-ranking personalities," said Peter Jacob, Executive Secretary of National Justice and Peace Commission (a human rights body of Catholic Bishops' Conference of Pakistan).

The Christians of Pakistan announced three days mourning throughout the country. They said that the assassination of Bhatti, 42, is clearly an act of terrorism and government should control those elements that are playing with the lives of innocent people. Archbishop Lawrence John Saldanha, Chairperson of Pakistan Catholic Bishops Conference and Shahid Meraj, a representative of Church of Pakistan, another mainline Church, said in a joint statement, "Bhatti's assassination underlines the issue of protection of religious minorities, life and liberty. We would also like to appeal to the federal and provincial governments to wake up to the challenge of protection of the citizens of Pakistan. If the country becomes a killing field of the democrat and liberal individuals who exercise their freedom of conscience and expression, it would embolden the criminals trying to take charge of the country."

The attack was widely condemned at the national and international level. Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani condemned the murder, saying it will not deter the country from its fight against religious extremism. The Vatican also expressed outrage over the killing. In a statement, Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi said the murder of Bhatti was a "terribly grave new act of violence" that "demonstrates that the Pope's insistent addresses regarding violence against Christians and religious freedom have been justified." In Washington, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the assassination "an attack not only on one man but on the values of tolerance and respect for people of all faiths and."

Bhatti joined the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in 2002 and was elected a Member of the National Assembly, lower house of the parliament, on a reserved seat for minorities. He was made Federal Minister for Minorities in 2008 and again included in the federal cabinet with the same portfolio last month. Bhatti also received the International Religious Freedom Award for rendering services to the Christian community, becoming the first Pakistani to receive this award. He boldly defended Asia Noreen, a Christian mother of four, sentenced to death for alleged blasphemy against Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Many believe that it is not only the loss of Christian community but an attack on a liberal ideology in Pakistan. Human rights activists said it was another sign of rising intolerance at hands of violent extremists in Pakistan. It is awful that these elements are gaining space while liberal voices are shrinking. "Along with the killers, some lawyers, journalists, some political parties and some state operatives are also responsible for Bhatti's murder because they are not only supporting and glorifying the extremist groups but also openly preaching and propagating hatred and intolerance among the people of Pakistan," held Sarfraz Clement, a Christian development worker.

Christian Church leaders said that the government needs to go beyond the rhetoric of 'minorities are

enjoying' all the rights in the country and take practical step to curb extremism in Pakistan.

**By Aftab Alexander Mughal**

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