

Press Release

# Pakistan: Pandering to extremists fuels persecution of Ahmadis

Government Must Repeal 'Blasphemy Law' and End Persecution of Religious Minority

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## Government Must Repeal 'Blasphemy Law' and End Persecution of Religious .

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(New York, May 6, 2007) — The Pakistani government should stop pandering to Islamist extremist groups that foment harassment and violence against the minority Ahmadiyya religious community, Human Rights Watch said today.

Human Rights Watch called on the government of President General Pervez Musharraf to repeal laws that discriminate against religious minorities such as the Ahmadis, including the penal statute that makes capital punishment mandatory for "blasphemy."

In the most recent incident, police in Lahore on April 22 supervised the illegal demolition of the boundary wall of an Ahmadi-owned graveyard. Two extremist Islamist groups, Sunni Tehrik and Tehrik-e-Tahafaz-e-Naomoos-e-Risalat, had put pressure on the provincial authorities over the building of the wall on the grounds that Ahmadis might try to establish a center of "apostasy" within the enclosed walls. Leaders of the two groups had also threatened to kill Ahmadis if the police did not intervene on their behalf.

"Musharraf should stop giving in to Islamist extremist groups that foment harassment and violence against the minority Ahmadi community," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "As religious persecution by Islamist groups intensifies, pandering to extremists sets a dangerous precedent."

Founded in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the Ahmadiyya community is a religious group that identifies itself as Muslim. Estimates suggest at least 2 million Ahmadis live in Pakistan. Ahmadis differ with other Muslims over the exact definition of Prophet Mohammad being the "final" monotheist prophet. Many Muslims consider the Ahmadiyya to be non-Muslims.

The persecution of the Ahmadiyya community is wholly legalized, even encouraged, by the Pakistani government. Pakistan's penal code explicitly discriminates against religious minorities and targets Ahmadis in particular by prohibiting them from "indirectly or directly posing as a Muslim." Ahmadis are prohibited from declaring or propagating their faith publicly, building mosques, or making the call for Muslim prayer.

Pakistan's "Blasphemy Law," as Section 295-C of the Penal Code is known, makes the death penalty mandatory for blasphemy. Under this law, the Ahmadi belief in the prophethood of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad is considered blasphemous insofar as it "defiles the name of Prophet Muhammad." In 2006, at least 25 Ahmadis were charged under various provisions of the blasphemy law across Pakistan. Many of these individuals remain in prison.

Though violence against the Ahmadiyya community has decreased from historically high levels in the 1980s, when the military government of General Zia-ul-Haq unleashed a wave of persecution against them, Ahmadis continue to be injured and killed and see their homes and businesses burned down in anti-Ahmadi attacks. The authorities continue to arrest, jail and charge Ahmadis for blasphemy and other offenses because of their religious beliefs. In several instances, the police have been complicit in harassment and the framing of false charges against Ahmadis, or stood by in the face of anti-Ahmadi violence.

"Ahmadis become easy targets in times of religious and political insecurity," said Adams. "The Pakistani government has emboldened the extremists by failing to take action. It needs to repeal the laws used to persecute Ahmadis, and it must prosecute those responsible for anti-Ahmadi intimidation and violence."

However, charges are seldom brought against perpetrators of anti-Ahmadi violence and discrimination. Research by Human Rights Watch indicates that the police have failed to apprehend anyone implicated in such activity in the last two years.

On September 9, two journalists working for the Ahmadi publication Al Fazl were charged under various provisions of the blasphemy law and the anti-terrorism act at the urging of Islamist extremists from the Khatm-e-Nabuwat group, which had called for a ban on Ahmadi newspapers and other publications. The journalists have subsequently been released on bail but the editor, publisher and printer of Al Fazl continue to face court proceedings.

On June 22 last year, a mob burned down Ahmadi shops and homes in Jhando Sahi village near the town of Daska in Punjab province, forcing more than 100 Ahmadis to flee their homes. The police, though present at the scene, failed to intervene or arrest any of the culprits. On the hand, the authorities charged seven Ahmadis under the blasphemy law. The Ahmadis have now returned to their homes, but the situation remains tense.

On October 7, 2005, masked gunmen attacked Ahmadi worshippers in a mosque in the near the town of Mandi Bahauddin in Punjab province. Eight Ahmadis were killed and 18 injured in the attack. The perpetrators remain at large.

Since 2000, an estimated 350 Ahmadis have been formally charged in criminal cases, including blasphemy. Several have been convicted and face life imprisonment or death sentences pending appeal. The offenses charged included wearing an Islamic slogan on a shirt, planning to build an Ahmadi mosque in Lahore, and distributing Ahmadi literature in a public square. As a result, thousands of Ahmadis have fled Pakistan to seek asylum in countries including Canada and the United States.

The Pakistani government continues to actively encourage legal and procedural discrimination against Ahmadis. For example, all Pakistani Muslim citizens applying for passports are obliged to sign a statement explicitly stating that they consider the founder of the Ahmadi

community an “imposter” and consider Ahmadis to be non-Muslims.

"Under Pakistan's Blasphemy Law, virtually any public act of worship or devotion by an Ahmadi can be treated as a criminal offense," said Adams. "Ahmadis could be sentenced to death for simply professing their faith."

Human Rights Watch urged the international community to press the Pakistani government to:

- Repeal the Blasphemy Law;
- Prosecute those responsible for harassing, and planning and executing attacks against the Ahmadiyya and other minorities; and,
- Take steps to encourage religious tolerance within Pakistani society.

"Pakistan's continued use of its blasphemy law against Ahmadis and other religious minorities is disgraceful," said Adams. "The government's failure to repeal this law contradicts its claim of 'enlightened moderation.'"

### **Background on the Ahmadiyya community**

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, the official name of the community, is a contemporary messianic movement founded in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1839-1908), who was born in the Punjabi village of Qadian, now in India. Some derogatorily refer to the Ahmadiyya community as the “Qadiani” (or “Kadiyani”) community, a term derived from the birthplace of the founder of the movement. In 1889, Ahmad declared that he had received divine revelation authorizing him to accept the baya'ah, or allegiance of the faithful. In 1891, he claimed to be the expected mahdi or messiah of the latter days, the “Awaited One” of the monotheist community of religions, and the messiah foretold by the Prophet Mohammed. Ahmad described his teachings, incorporating both Sufi and orthodox Islamic, Hindu, and Christian elements, as an attempt to revitalize Islam in the face of the British Raj, proselytizing Protestant Christianity, and resurgent Hinduism. Thus, the Ahmadiyya community believes that Ahmad conceived the community as a revivalist movement within Islam and not as a new religion.

Members of the Ahmadiyya community (“Ahmadis”)

profess to be Muslims. They contend that Ahmad meant to revive the true spirit and message of Islam that the Prophet Mohammed introduced and preached. Virtually all mainstream Muslim sects believe that Ahmad proclaimed himself as a prophet, thereby rejecting a fundamental tenet of Islam: Khatme Nabuwat (literally, the belief in the “finality of prophethood” - that the Prophet Mohammed was the last of the line of prophets leading back through Jesus, Moses, and Abraham). Ahmadis respond that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was a non-law-bearing prophet subordinate in status to Prophet Mohammed; he came to illuminate and reform Islam, as predicted by Prophet Mohammed. For Ahmad and his followers, the Arabic Khatme Nabuwat does not refer to the finality of prophethood in a literal sense - that is, to prophethood’s chronological cessation - but rather to its culmination and exemplification in the Prophet Mohammed. Ahmadis believe that “finality” in a chronological sense is a worldly concept, whereas “finality” in a metaphoric sense carries much more spiritual significance.

The exact size of the Ahmadiyya community worldwide is unclear, but estimates suggest they number under 10 million, mostly concentrated in India and Pakistan but also present in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Gambia and Europe.

### **Background on persecution of the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan**

The Ahmadiyya community has long been persecuted in Pakistan. Since 1953, when the first post-independence anti-Ahmadiyya riots broke out, the relatively small Ahmadi community in Pakistan has endured persecution. Between 1953 and 1973, this persecution was sporadic but, in 1974, a new wave of anti-Ahmadi disturbances spread across Pakistan. In response, Pakistan’s parliament introduced amendments to the constitution which defined the term “Muslim” in the Pakistani context and listed groups that were deemed to be non-Muslim under Pakistani law. Put into effect on September 6, 1974, the amendment explicitly deprived Ahmadis of their identity as Muslims.

In 1984, Pakistan’s penal code was amended yet again. As a result of these amendments, five

ordinances that explicitly targeted religious minorities acquired legal status: a law against blasphemy; a law punishing the defiling of the Quran; a prohibition against insulting the wives, family, or companions of the Prophet of Islam; and two laws specifically restricting the activities of Ahmadis. On April 26, 1984, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq issued these last two laws as part of Martial Law Ordinance XX, which amended Pakistan's Penal Code, Sections 298-B and 298-C.

Ordinance XX undercut the activities of religious minorities generally, but struck at Ahmadis in particular by prohibiting them from "indirectly or directly posing as a Muslim." Ahmadis thus could no longer profess their faith, either orally or in writing. Pakistani police destroyed Ahmadi translations of and commentaries on the Quran and banned Ahmadi publications, the use of any Islamic terminology on Ahmadi wedding invitations, the offering of Ahmadi funeral prayers, and the displaying of the Kalima (the statement that "there is no god but Allah, Mohammed is Allah's prophet," the principal creed of Muslims) on Ahmadi gravestones. In addition, Ordinance XX prohibited Ahmadis from declaring their faith publicly, propagating their faith, building mosques, or making the call for Muslim prayer. In short, virtually any public act of worship or devotion by an Ahmadi could be treated as a criminal offense.

With the passage of the Criminal Law Act of 1986, parliament added Section 295-C to the Pakistan Penal Code. The "Blasphemy Law," as it came to be known, made the death penalty mandatory for blasphemy. General Zia-ul-Haq and his military government institutionalized the persecution of Ahmadis as well as other minorities in Pakistan with Section 295-C. The Ahmadi belief in the prophethood of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was now considered blasphemous insofar as it "defiled the name of Prophet Muhammad." Therefore, theoretically, Ahmadis could be sentenced to death for simply professing their faith.

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**P.S.**

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