

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM R O U N D T A B L E

Washington, D.C.

March 16, 2016

The Honorable Ed Royce
Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee
2172 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman,

We write as a diverse coalition of non-governmental organizations and individuals who are scholars, religious leaders, human rights advocates, and lay people to strongly urge you to address concerns over the proposed sale of F-16 fighter jets and additional military equipment to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, as notified by the Obama Administration on February 11, 2016.

We call upon you to bring H.J.Res. 82, Relating to the disapproval of the proposed foreign military sale to the Government of Pakistan of F-16 Block 52 aircraft, introduced by Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), to the House Foreign Affairs Committee for vote by the whole chamber.

We urge you in your capacity as Chairman of this august committee to ensure that Congressional oversight by the House of Representatives halts this sale, in order to protect our country's national security objectives of ensuring peace and stability in South Asia, while promoting human rights and religious freedom in Pakistan.

Despite the provision of billions of dollars of military aid in recent years, Pakistan has failed to effectively confront terrorist and militant groups operating in the AfPak border region. In fact, while we continue to provide military equipment and money to Pakistan, its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency and military establishment continue to protect and support the Haqqani Network, the Afghan Taliban, and other Islamist terrorist groups that have killed thousands of American soldiers and undermined our efforts to stabilize and secure Afghanistan. Pakistan's ISI similarly supports terror groups, such as Jaish-e-Mohammad, that have launched attacks against India and threaten to disrupt regional security.

Furthermore, although Pakistan has been repeatedly censured for its deplorable human rights record and has denied fundamental freedoms to all its citizens, the U.S. Government has repeatedly looked the other way and persisted in providing military aid.

Religious minorities in Pakistan, including Hindus, Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, and Shia Muslims, as well as atheists, face systematic persecution and violence, and their religious freedom is severely restricted by the government through discriminatory laws and inequitable constitutional provisions. Women of minority faiths, in particular, comprise the most vulnerable segment of Pakistani society, and their fundamental rights are violated with impunity. Moderate Sunni Muslims are also publicly targeted and harassed by authorities for espousing pluralistic views.

The government of Pakistan has further failed to prosecute radical militant organizations and their leaders for inciting large-scale anti-minority violence, and instead has allowed such groups to operate freely throughout the country.

The following provides a brief overview of some of the major issues faced by religious minorities in Pakistan.

- Discriminatory laws, such as the blasphemy laws, have emboldened extremists and in many instances, the mere allegation of blasphemy has been used as a pretext to attack and kill members of minority religions. The laws further prohibit Ahmadi Muslims from openly and publicly practicing their faith. In 2011, two government officials who dared to speak out against blasphemy laws in defence of Christian woman Asia Bibi, were assassinated by extremists; Salman Taseer, Governor of Punjab and a Sunni Muslim, and Shahbaz Bhatti, Federal Minister for Minority Affairs and a Christian.
- Mumtaz Qadri, who served as Governor Taseer's bodyguard when he carried out his assassination, was recently executed after sitting on death row for almost four years. His funeral was attended by over 100,000 supporters from all walks of life signifying deep resentment in society of religious minorities leaving little hope for legislative reform of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan.
- In recent years, there has been a surge in attacks on minority places of worship by violent extremist Muslim groups. For instance, a Shia mosque in Shikarpur was bombed in January 2015, while two churches in Lahore were bombed by a Taliban splinter group in March in furtherance of its quest to implement sharia law. Other Christian, Hindu, and Ahmadi Muslim religious sites have similarly been targeted by extremists.
- Gender based violence is used as a means to intimidate and harass minority communities in Pakistan. An estimated 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls are kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam every year, according to the Movement for Solidarity and Peace.
- Pakistan's public school system and its madrassas continue to use textbooks that indoctrinate students with prejudicial and intolerant views of religious minorities, as well as the U.S. and its allies - including Israel and India, according to a special report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.
- The large-scale exodus of Hindus, primarily from the Sindh province, to India to escape religious persecution and economic discrimination continues unabated and is contributing to humanitarian issues in the wider region.

Mounting anti-minority violence, religious intolerance, and government sanctioned discrimination threaten the security and stability of Pakistan and impede U.S. counter-terrorism efforts in the region. Despite the provision of thirty-one billion dollars in U.S. taxpayer funded military and economic aid since 2001, extremism remains rampant in this nuclear armed country. Rapidly deteriorating conditions for religious minorities threaten the security of its own people and of South Asia as a whole, thus rendering Pakistan an unreliable partner for the United States.

At this critical juncture, it is imperative that we hold Pakistan accountable for its actions and refrain from rewarding it with additional military equipment in the form of F-16 fighter jets, which will do little to further our counterterrorism efforts. More importantly, such a sale will restrict our ability to address concerns of basic human rights and religious freedom in Pakistan.

We thus respectfully urge you to bring H.J. Res 82 to your committee for markup to display America's commitment to shifting our bilateral relationship with Pakistan from a military centric one to one based on supporting civil society, democratization initiatives, human rights, and religious freedom.

We hope to work with you on this urgent matter. Please inform jay@hafsite.org should you need additional information or other materials on this subject.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

ORGANIZATIONS

Hindu American Foundation

American Islamic Congress

Christian Solidarity Worldwide – UK

Free Muslim Association

Institute for Gilgit Baltistan

Shia Rights Watch

World Hindu Council - America

Individuals

With title and organization for identification purposes

Lauren B. Homer
Attorney and President
Law and Liberty Trust

Dr. Joel C. Hunter
Senior Pastor
Northland - A Church Distributed

Greg Mitchell
President
The Mitchell Firm

Scott Morgan
President
Red Eagle Enterprises

CC:
The Honorable Eliot Engel - Ranking Member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee