

Pakistani prelate calls official's remark on blasphemy law 'setback'

BANGALORE, India - Catholic officials in Pakistan expressed disappointment after Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani reiterated there would be no amendment to the country's blasphemy law, which makes insulting the Prophet Mohammed or the Quran punishable by life imprisonment or death.

"This is a setback. We have to take it in our stride and move on," Archbishop Lawrence Saldanha of Lahore, president of the Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference, told Catholic New Service Jan. 12, hours after the prime minister's remarks.

"We are really disappointed," Peter Jacob, executive secretary of the church's National Commission for Justice and Peace, told CNS from his office in Lahore.

However, Jacob said Gilani has his own "political compulsions" to make such a declaration on the sensitive issue.

The Pakistan Peoples Party, the major party in Gilani's coalition government, has only 125 seats in the 342-member National Assembly and is dependent on the support of pro-Islamic parties and independent legislators for the survival of the government.

Beena Sarwar, a Muslim and prominent member of Citizens for Democracy, which has been campaigning against the abuse of the blasphemy law, told CNS that the prime minister's remark ruling out an amendment "appears to be a political move."

"This is aimed at defusing the situation, as the right-wing extremist lobby is putting a huge amount of pressure on the government through demonstrations," she said.

However, "the appeasement of right-wing militant hardliners" to hold on to power, Sarwar cautioned, "does not work and only backfires in the long run."

Speaking to journalists, Gilani urged them to be responsible and stop the

controversy on the blasphemy law. He also reacted to Pope Benedict XVI's Jan. 10 address to diplomats, in which the pope called for the law's repeal, saying it "serves as a pretext for acts of injustice and violence against religious minorities."

"It is our law and we will work according to our law," Gilani said.

Pope Benedict's address followed the Jan. 4 assassination of Salman Taseer, governor of Pakistan's Punjab province, by his security guard for his criticism of the blasphemy law and his support for Asia Bibi, a Christian woman sentenced to death on blasphemy charge in early November.

Archbishop Saldanha said he was not surprised that some Islamic groups planned Jan. 14 protests against Pope Benedict's remarks.

"Some groups are taking advantage of the situation," he said.

About 97 percent of Pakistan's 184 million people are Muslim.