

Pakistan's bishops seek curbs on extremism to protect freedoms

LAHORE, Pakistan - Church commissions and human rights organizations in Pakistan have called on the government to allow "freedom of conscience and expression" by curbing increasing extremism in the country.

"We strongly condemn target killings and judicial ruling on journalists, especially in cases against political workers," said the Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference's National Commission for Justice and Peace. "We support the political process without any armed or religious interference. It is imperative to separate religion from state matters."

The commission sponsored a program in Lahore Jan. 31 to discuss concerns about the country's crippled economy, increasing extremism and a lack of direction to address social ills, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News. Organizers said 500 people attended the event, with most speakers being politicians.

"The prevalent mindset is a major concern for us," said Hina Jilani, Punjab chairwoman of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. "Religious parties are using street power for political gains. Instigative fatwas (decrees) are being issued without any check, and TV anchors are highlighting opinions of banned religious outfits."

Christians nationwide observed a day of prayer, fasting and penance Jan. 30 after the Pakistani bishops issued a call for peace and unity.

More than 40,000 people rallied in Lahore Jan. 30 to protest any change in the blasphemy laws, which make insults of the Quran an offense punishable by up to life imprisonment and call for the death penalty for anyone convicted of insulting Mohammed. On the same day, civil society groups observed the chehlum - marking 40 days after a death - for the assassinated governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer.

Taseer was gunned down Jan. 4 in Islamabad. His bodyguard, Malik Mumtaz Hussain Qadri, told police he killed Taseer for criticizing the country's blasphemy

laws.

Pope Benedict XVI also urged Pakistan to repeal its blasphemy laws while referring to Taseer's "tragic murder."

"Many Christians are fearful of a Muslim backlash after the pope's appeal," said Franciscan Father Abid Habib, president of the Major Superiors Leadership Conference of Pakistan, as banners glorifying Qadri still fluttered along the roads of Punjab province.

Church leaders have long charged that the blasphemy laws are being abused for personal gain and to harass non-Muslims.