

Speech by H.E. Androulla Kaminara, Ambassador of the European Union to Pakistan.

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Honourable Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen

Hello from Islamabad! I am honoured to be speaking to you today. Pakistan's founding father - **Mohammad Ali Jinnah** - famously said:

'We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State'.

While Pakistan was created 73 years ago to provide a safe homeland for the Muslims of South Asia, the rights of other religious groups are enshrined in the **Constitution**. To symbolise this the national flag has the Crescent moon and star on a green background referring to Islam and a white strip stands for the various religious minorities.

But what is the situation in the country today?

- Only around 4% of Pakistan's 220 million population belong to non-Muslim religions. Within the Muslim population up to 40 million, are Shi'a, making it the second largest Shi'a population outside Iran.
- Religious tensions, discrimination, threats and **violence against religious minorities** continue to be of high concern, marked by **hate speech**, by **social inequalities** and **limited prospects for social mobility**. **Forced conversions** of women and girls continue to be reported although the actual numbers and circumstances are often disputed. **Ahmadis** have been declared by the Constitution as non-Muslims despite the fact that they self-identify as Muslims and they are barred from openly professing and practicing their faith.

- To be noted the **factors that impact negatively** on interfaith harmony are not only religious differences: The very low literacy rate plays an important role. Religious affiliation is often linked to low living standards: as Christians tend to be disproportionately poor and disproportionately illiterate. **Religious extremism** finds a particularly receptive audience among uneducated and poor Pakistanis but elicits sympathy also among large parts of the conservative middle class.
- **Religious parties** play only a minor role in National Parliament. However, religion has a strong influence on politics overall. Religious extremists like the ***Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP)***, recently mobilised hundreds of thousands under the banner of the fight against blasphemy. They might have relatively low success at the ballot, but nonetheless put considerable pressure on the government and other parties through their street power. Over the last year they have mobilised huge numbers of demonstrators on several occasions. In April, this year the government arrested its leader and banned the party – as a result of the clashes it is reported that 10 people died and over 500 police officers were injured.

Turning now to the blasphemy laws:

- In 2020 the number of people condemned of blasphemy rose to 35 from 29 the year before. Considerably larger number of such accusations (200+) had been filed. Being accused of blasphemy usually means a stay in prison of 8-10 years – even if you are finally proved innocent – due to many reasons but also the slowness of the justice system here.
- Over 90% of the blasphemy cases are against Muslims. Mostly concerned are Shi'a (roughly 50%), followed by Sunni and Ahmadi. Only 3.5% of people charged for blasphemy cases are against Christians.

- There is a considerable **intimidating effect** on any member of minority groups. It is difficult for anybody, including police officials or judges, to publicly question or reject blasphemy cases. Vigilante groups feel emboldened to take justice in their own hands. I remind here that in 2011, then Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer was killed for speaking out against blasphemy law.
- However, despite many of the people accused of blasphemy being awarded the death penalty, **Pakistan has never executed anyone** on the basis of blasphemy allegations. It has to be noted that the last execution of death row prisoners, accused of any crime, took place in end of 2019 – unlike previous years where over 15-20 people were executed per year.

Let me turn to what the EU's is doing in this respect:

- Human rights and minority issues are regularly discussed in the traditional **dialogues** between Pakistan and the EU. I refer to the November 2020 strategic dialogue between HRVP Borrell with MFA Qureshi for example, as well as to the *Joint Commission* and the relevant *Sub-groups among others*. Under our development cooperation, we implement **important programmes and projects** in order to support the **improvement of the rule of law and promotion of Human Rights** in Pakistan.
- A very important initiative was launched last year by the **EU Delegation together with the Chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology** and Maulana Azad (Khatib of Badshahi Mosque in Lahore). The initiative led to the adoption in December 2020 of a landmark **Joint Declaration**, which includes the following:
 - We recognize the existence of diversity of religions and beliefs in Pakistan and desire an integrated environment based on the principle of respect for human rights and equality for followers of all religions.

- We pledge to struggle for women's rights and their active role in society.
- We condemn hate speeches against religion, race and colour, which can result in any form of harm.
- Of course, we are continuing this initiative in 2021 with also the support of Member States.

Honourable Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen,

- We wish to **further promote interfaith and intra-faith dialogue in Pakistan**. We will remain engaged and increase our efforts to help **protect minorities** in Pakistan. I am convinced this will also contribute to stability and security and to more development.
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