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URI OFFERS CONDOLENCES TO PAKISTAN AFTER BHATTI'S DEATH
Assassinated minister was considered a great leader and advocate of peace and dialogue among religions

San Francisco, CA March 3, 2011 – [URI \(United Religions Initiative\)](#) joins the nation of Pakistan in mourning the tragic death of Minister for Minorities Shahbaz Bhatti, who was assassinated on Wednesday in Islamabad.

Mr. Bhatti was considered a great advocate of human dignity, equal rights and protection for all, and his brutal assassination—coming on the heels of the assassination of Punjab governor Salman Taseer in January—has brought a shock wave of fear among promoters of peace and interreligious dialogue in the country.

URI, the world's largest grassroots interfaith organization, has 43 member organizations in Pakistan—called Cooperation Circles—working to build peace and address the root causes of conflict.

Its leaders there counted Mr. Bhatti as a personal friend and a friend to the cause of peace among religions. Mr. Bhatti participated in several URI seminars and conferences, and had invited its leadership to Islamabad to meet the President and Prime Minister and participate in the highest-level meetings on interfaith harmony.

URI Global Trustee Maulana Azad, Grand Imam of the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore, Pakistan's second-largest mosque, strongly condemned the assassination and called Mr. Bhatti's death a terrible loss to the nation. "We have lost a great friend and promoter of peace," he said.

"We have lost a great leader," said Father James Channan, URI's Regional Coordinator for Pakistan. "He was very bold in advocating for our rights. He wanted to see Pakistan as the nation dreamed of by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of our country, a civilized nation where religious freedom and expression of all people was guaranteed.

“He was very courageous and I was proud of him. He was deeply loved and respected by all Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Parsi and Buddhist minorities of Pakistan.”

Fr. Channan was among a group of Church leaders who issued a [joint statement](#) calling for the government to “wake up to the challenge of protection of the citizens of Pakistan” and declaring a closure of Christian schools and institutions around the country for three days of mourning.

Cooperation Circles all over the country and in Kashmir have strongly condemned this act of terrorism and vowed to stand firm for religions freedom in the face of extremism. Several URI-Pakistan leaders will participate in Mr. Bhatti’s funeral in Kushpur on March 4th to pay their last homage.

In [a letter to Mr. Bhatti’s friends and families](#), URI Executive Director Charles P. Gibbs wrote, “we hope and pray for a better future where the values for which Shahbaz Bhatti gave his life triumph over the vicious hatred of the extremists who took his life.

“As a global community, we commit ourselves to act in this world so that peace, justice and healing will prevail.”

For more information about URI or URI-Pakistan, or to schedule an interview with Charles Gibbs, please contact Julian Foley, jfoley@uri.org.

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About URI:

URI is a global network of 500 grassroots organizations, called Cooperation Circles, dedicated to peace and justice through interfaith and cross-cultural cooperation. Its nearly half a million members are overcoming distrust and hostility every day for the good of their communities—mediating religiously motivated conflict; building schools, orphanages and health clinics; campaigning for citizenship rights and more in 78 countries. They touch the lives of an estimated 2.5 million people. The network is led by Executive Director Charles Gibbs, President William E. Swing, and Yoland Trevino, chair of an elected 29-member Global Council of Trustees from 19 countries.

Visit www.uri.org for more information about URI’s work in Africa; Asia; Europe; Latin America and the Caribbean; Middle East and North Africa; North America; and Southeast Asia and the Pacific.