

Vatican Interreligious Dialogue Leader in Pakistan

Cardinal Tauran Meets With Zardari Amid Turmoil Over Blasphemy Case

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, NOV. 26, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue is in Pakistan for a visit that is seen as an encouragement for Christians, precisely as turmoil continues over the case of a Christian woman who was sentenced to hang for allegedly blaspheming Mohammed.

Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran's visit to Pakistan was planned some time ago, but it has taken on greater weight as international attention continues focused on the case of Asia Bibi.

Bibi, 45, was charged a year ago for blaspheming Mohammed in a conflict with fellow farm workers. She was sentenced to death earlier this month. But on Monday, it was reported that she had received a pardon from Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and had fled to an unknown location for her protection.

Now it seems those announcements were premature.

A report Thursday from the Fides agency stressed the timing of Cardinal Tauran's visit given the difficult civil and political situation resulting from the sentence and the subsequent announcement of Bibi's pardon.

"The visit of Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran is a great encouragement to Christians in Pakistan. It comes at a critical moment, in which there are increasing social and religious tensions, for the matter of Asia Bibi and for other reasons," Archbishop Lawrence Saldanha of Lahore, president of the Pakistan Catholic Bishops Conference, told Fides.

"Right now we are concerned about the growing climate of intolerance," the archbishop added. "The tension has risen, following the manifestations and appeals of radical Islamic groups who wish to exacerbate the social and religious polarization."

Calming tempers

Archbishop Saldanha expressed his hopes that Cardinal Tauran's visit "may serve to calm tempers and contribute to a solution for the case of Asia Bibi."

According to the 74-year-old archbishop, the Church sees a re-trial as the best solution to the Bibi case. A pardon, the prelate suggested, implies her guilt, whereas a trial could demonstrate her innocence.

"It's the only way to stop the protests," explained the prelate.

Cardinal Tauran was to meet Thursday with the Minister for Religious Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, and President Zardari.

Today and Saturday he was scheduled to convene with the nations bishops and Catholic communities of Pakistan, and to participate in an interreligious meeting.

Both Benedict XVI and his secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, have made public appeals for Bibi's release.

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