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Mr Peter Van Dalen MEP
European Parliament
Rue Wiertz 60
1047 Bruxelles

Dear Mr Van Dalen,

Thank you for your letter and the accompanying petition concerning religious freedom and the blasphemy laws in Pakistan.

I fully agree that the situation for Christians in Pakistan is deeply troubling. The EU is well aware of the recent appalling attack on the Joseph Colony in March, as well as previous attacks on Christians in Pakistan. Indeed, the EU's Head of Delegation in Pakistan conveyed the EU's concerns about the attack in Lahore to the Authorities shortly after the incident.

We have repeatedly expressed our concern about the climate of intolerance and violence, the attacks on Christians, and the potential for abuse of the blasphemy laws. Tragically, there are examples of minorities being targeted because of their religious affiliation almost every day. This affects not only Christians, but also Shias, Hindus, Ahmadis and others. This issue is regularly raised in the EU's human rights dialogue with Pakistan and was addressed during my visit to Islamabad last year, when I again encouraged the Government of Pakistan to take urgent measures in order to ensure the protection of minorities and address the growing climate of violent intolerance in the country.

In the Foreign Affairs Council conclusions of 11 March, the EU foreign ministers and I joined in strongly condemning all acts of violence against vulnerable religious minorities in Pakistan and urged the Authorities to bring the perpetrators to justice. The conclusions also underlined EU plans to engage promptly with the next Pakistani Government on the objectives of the EU-Pakistan Engagement Plan in which human rights, including the protection of minorities, are a priority. We will continue to focus on the need to fully protect every individual's right to freedom of religion and belief, in Pakistan or elsewhere.

Sadly, it remains the case that the fundamental causes which make violent abuse and intolerance possible, are yet to be addressed. The lack of an adequate state education and the serious economic problems mean that unemployed young people are open to manipulation by unscrupulous local politicians or religious leaders. Short of resolving these issues, efforts by Authorities to combat intolerance and violence will continue to be challenged by radical groups which target religious minorities as part of their agenda.

The EU is supporting projects which are intended to improve access to justice and to strengthen the quality of law enforcement in Pakistan. Support for education is a major component of EU assistance in Pakistan, including with regard to promoting understanding and tolerance of other religions. We also expect to support capacity-building projects in federal and provincial institutions with the objective to improve the awareness and protection of human rights, access to justice for vulnerable groups and to strengthen civil society organisations. These measures are coordinated by our Delegation in Islamabad which is fully engaged in all these areas.

Under the EU's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) regime, as of 2014, those benefitting from GSP+ must effectively implement a number of key international conventions, including human rights.

The EU supports all efforts to combat violence and protect the rights of Christians and other minorities in Pakistan. Following the general elections in Pakistan on 11 May, we intend to raise these matters with the new Government of Pakistan as soon as it is appropriate to do so.

Yours sincerely,

Cat: AS

Catherine Ashton