

**Debate Pack**

CDP-0160 (2022)

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# Use of blasphemy laws and allegations in Commonwealth countries

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# 1 Background

A Backbench Business Committee debate on the use of blasphemy laws and allegations in Commonwealth countries is scheduled for Tuesday 11 October 2022 from 11.30am to 1.00pm. The debate will be led by Jim Shannon MP.

## 1.1 Blasphemy laws in the Commonwealth

As of 2019, 79 countries globally had laws or policies banning blasphemy. This includes speech or actions considered to be insulting, contemptuous or showing lack of reverence for God or sacred things.

According to the Pew Research Trust, there were 26 Commonwealth states with blasphemy laws in 2019 (46% of its 56 members). In some countries, including Pakistan, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados, these laws date back to their period under British rule.

In 2021, the US State Department reported that those actively enforcing laws included Bangladesh, Brunei, Nigeria, and Pakistan. Those not enforcing these laws included member states in the Caribbean.<sup>1</sup>

### 26 Commonwealth states had blasphemy laws in 2019

Antigua and Barbuda	Cyprus	Mauritius	St Lucia
Bahamas	The Gambia	Nigeria	St Vincent and the Grenadines
Bangladesh	Grenada	Pakistan	Trinidad and Tobago
Barbados	Guyana	Papua New Guinea	Vanuatu
Belize	India	Rwanda	Zambia
Botswana	Kenya	Seychelles	
Brunei Darussalam	Malawi	Sri Lanka	

Source: Pew Research Center [Four in ten countries and territories worldwide had blasphemy laws in 2019](#), January 2022

<sup>1</sup> US State Department's [International religious freedom report 2021](#), June 2022

Commonwealth countries that have recently repealed blasphemy laws include New Zealand (2019)<sup>2</sup> and Malta (2016).<sup>3</sup>

The below section provides a background to blasphemy laws in five states.

### Bangladesh

There is no specific blasphemy law, but the US State Department reports that authorities use elements of the country's penal code and telecommunication laws to charge those perceived to be criticising Islam.<sup>4</sup>

### Brunei Darussalam

In 2013, Brunei Darussalam created a new penal code which imposes the death penalty for some blasphemy cases, as well as other restrictions on religious freedom including against propagating any religion other than Islam. The code came into force in 2019. A moratorium on the death penalty was adopted the same year.<sup>5</sup>

The country's government has long enforced the Sharia Penal Code, which states offences such as blasphemy and apostasy are punishable by corporal and capital punishment. The US State Department says the death penalty has not been applied in these cases since 1957 but there have been some instances of caning as a punishment. It reports fears that the laws can be used to constrain non-Muslim group activities.<sup>6</sup>

### India

India's constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the right of all to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion. The country's penal code, however, also criminalises "promoting enmity" between different groups on religious grounds and "deliberate and malicious acts" intended to "outrage religious feelings...by insulting" religion or belief.

In 2021 there were reports of several individuals being arrested for making comments considered offensive to Hinduism, both online and in other settings. Muslims and Christians were among those arrested. Communal violence also occurred in some cases.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, [Four in ten countries and territories worldwide had blasphemy laws in 2019](#), January 2022

<sup>3</sup> United States Commission on Religious Freedom, [Respecting rights? Measuring the world's blasphemy laws](#) (PDF), 2017, p20

<sup>4</sup> US State Department's [International religious freedom report 2021: Bangladesh](#), June 2022

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Brunei's pernicious new penal code](#), 22 May 2019

<sup>6</sup> US State Department, [2021 report on international religious freedom: Brunei](#), 2 June 2022

<sup>7</sup> US State Department, [2021 report on international religious freedom: India](#), 2 June 2022, Sections II "legal framework" and "Government practices", and section III

## Nigeria

While Nigeria's constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression, its criminal code makes it an offence to insult religion. The NGO Human Rights Watch report that allegations of blasphemy by Muslims against Christians or other Muslims often trigger violence.<sup>8</sup>

There have been reported deadly riots involving allegations of blasphemy in 1994, 2002, 2007, 2021 and 2022.<sup>9</sup>

Twelve states in Northern Nigeria have Islamic courts that also consider blasphemy an offence punishable by death. There have been reports that courts have imposed such sentences in both 2015 and 2020.<sup>10</sup>

In August 2022, a northern Nigerian court ruled that these laws do not violate the country's constitution.<sup>11</sup>

## Pakistan

Pakistan's blasphemy laws were first introduced under British rule in 1860 but expanded by Pakistan's military government in the 1980s. Rights groups have reported affected groups have included Muslims, Ahmadis, Christians, and Hindus. There has been domestic discussion on reform, but the laws remain.<sup>12</sup>

In 2020 the UK Government cited examples of blasphemy charges being used against academic and religious communities. The Pakistan Telecommunications Authority also targeted websites allegedly containing blasphemous content. Ahmadi Muslims were particularly affected.<sup>13</sup>

In 2022, the Commons International Development Committee, in its report on UK aid to Pakistan, said that the laws are "frequently misused to settle personal disputes and to target religious minorities." Those accused were often subject to "mob justice."

Blasphemy can carry the death penalty, but reportedly none have been executed due to many being acquitted by Pakistan's Supreme Court. At least 199 people were charged with blasphemy in 2020.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Student in Nigeria murdered over blasphemy allegation](#), 16 May 2022

<sup>9</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, [Gruesome "blasphemy" killing brings Nigeria's long-running ethno-religious divide into sharp focus](#), 16 May 2022

<sup>10</sup> BBC News, [Nigerian singer sentenced to death for blasphemy in Kano state](#), 10 August 2020; BBC News, [Nigeria court in Kano sentences nine people to death for blasphemy](#), 26 June 2015

<sup>11</sup> Reuters, [Nigeria's sharia blasphemy law not unconstitutional, court rules](#), 17 August 2022

<sup>12</sup> BBC News, [What are Pakistan's blasphemy laws?](#), 8 May 2019

<sup>13</sup> FCDO, [Human rights and democracy: 2020 FCDO report](#), 8 July 2021

<sup>14</sup> International Development Committee, [UK aid to Pakistan](#), HC 102, 29 April 2022, paras 61-66

## UK policy on FoRB

At the 2018 CHOGM, Commonwealth Leaders affirmed their commitment to FoRB as “essential for democracy and sustainable development.”<sup>15</sup>

The UK Government says it is “deeply concerned” about the use of blasphemy laws, and regularly applies diplomatic pressure to countries that use them. It has raised concerns with the Governments of India, Pakistan, and Nigeria, for example.<sup>16</sup>

In 2020 Fiona Bruce MP was appointed the UK Special Envoy for FoRB.<sup>17</sup>

In July 2022, the UK hosted an international conference on FoRB. Thirty countries joined the UK in signing up to statements. Participating Commonwealth members included Australia, Canada, and Kenya.<sup>18</sup>

[Statements](#) included those [committing signatories to speak out bilaterally](#) and through international organisations to raise FoRB issues and strengthen the capacity of those seeking to defend FoRB.<sup>19</sup>

To mark the conference, the UK announced £500,000 to provide legal support to areas where FoRB is under pressure.<sup>20</sup>

## Further reading on FoRB

Blasphemy laws are not the only issue of FoRB in the Commonwealth. Other issues include restrictions on proselytising:

1. US Commission on International Religious Freedom, [Respecting rights? Measuring the world’s blasphemy laws](#), 2017
2. Pew Research Center, [Four in ten countries and territories worldwide had blasphemy laws in 2019](#), 2022
3. US State Department, [Report on international religious freedom](#), 2022. Provides briefings for every country.
4. Commons Library, [Persecution of Christians, Muslims and minority groups in India](#), January 2021, and [Persecution of Christians and religious minorities in India](#), February 2022. Two Three-page summaries of events.

<sup>15</sup> The Commonwealth, [CHOGM communiqué “Towards a common future.”](#) 20 April 2018, para 2

<sup>16</sup> PQ 184571 [[India: Blasphemy](#)], 28 April 2021; PQ 145993 [[Pakistan: Blasphemy](#)], 31 March 2022 ; PQ 2644 [[Nigeria: Blasphemy](#)], 24 May 2022

<sup>17</sup> PQ 175919 [[Developing countries: Blasphemy](#)], 13 April 2021

<sup>18</sup> HLWS204 [[International ministerial conference on FoRB: London 2022](#)], 15 July 2022

<sup>19</sup> FCDO, [Broad conference statement on FoRB](#), updated 7 July 2022

<sup>20</sup> FCDO, [UK to champion importance of FoRB at global conference](#), 5 July 2022

## 2

## Press and media articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

[\*\*“Blasphemous” Pakistani couple tell of their extraordinary escape from death row\*\*](#)

ADF International  
22 August 2022

[\*\*Nigeria activists concerned as Secular Court upholds Islamic Court trial for blasphemy\*\*](#)

VOA (Voice of America)  
Timothy Obiezu  
19 August 2022

[\*\*Why it’s time to speak up against Pakistan’s blasphemy law\*\*](#)

Evangelical Alliance  
Nasir Saeed  
31 May 2022

[\*\*Blasphemy in Nigeria’s legal systems: an explainer\*\*](#)

The Conversation  
AbdulRazzaq A. Alaro  
15 May 2022

[\*\*The dangerous rise of Islamic blasphemy laws\*\*](#)

Spiked  
Wasiq Wasiq  
8 April 2022

[\*\*Blasphemy: Deborah Samuel’s parents break silence, make shocking revelations\*\*](#)

Daily Post  
Priscilla Dennis  
15 May 2022

[\*\*Eight-year-old becomes youngest person charged with blasphemy in Pakistan\*\*](#)

Guardian  
Haroon Janjua  
9 August 2021

**[Asia Bibi, Pakistani accused of blasphemy, yearns to return home](#)**

Guardian

25 February 2020

**[Blasphemy laws exist in 69 countries, report finds](#)**

National Secular Society

13 November 2019

**[What are Pakistan's blasphemy laws?](#)**

BBC News

8 May 2019

### 3

## PQs

### Pakistan: Blasphemy

26 Jul 2022 | HL1740

**Asked by: The Lord Bishop of Manchester**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what representations they have made to the government of Pakistan regarding the cases of (1) Qaisar Ayub, and (2) Amoon Ayub, who have been imprisoned and sentenced to death for blasphemy.

**Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We oppose the death penalty in all circumstances as a matter of principle and have made that clear to the Government of Pakistan. We are deeply concerned at the misuse of blasphemy laws in Pakistan. We continue to press for speedy and fair trials for those accused of blasphemy, including cases such as Qaiser and Amoon Ayub, and urge the authorities to ensure the safety of those charged with blasphemy. Most recently, the British High Commissioner in Islamabad raised the misuse of the blasphemy laws in his meeting last month [in June] with Pakistan's new Human Rights Minister, Mian Riaz Hussain Pirzada.

### Amoon and Qaisar Ayub

28 Jun 2022 | HL939

**Asked by: Lord Harries of Pentregarth**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what representations they are making to the government of Pakistan regarding the death sentences given to Qaiser and Amoon Ayub.

**Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We oppose the death penalty in all circumstances as a matter of principle, and have made that clear to the Government of Pakistan. We are deeply concerned at the misuse of blasphemy laws in Pakistan. We continue to press for speedy and fair trials for those accused of blasphemy, including cases such as Qaiser and Amoon Ayub, and urge the authorities to ensure the safety of those charged and those later released.



### **Nigeria: Blasphemy**

**24 May 2022 | 2644**

**Asked by: Marsha De Cordova**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps she is taking to protect freedom of religion or belief in the world following the murder of a student who was beaten and burnt to death for alleged blasphemy in Nigeria.

**Answering member: Vicky Ford Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The murder of Deborah Samuel in Sokoto State, Nigeria, on 13 May was a barbaric and heinous act. I [Minister Ford] have expressed my public condemnation, and have urged the relevant authorities to ensure the perpetrators face justice in line with the law.

The severity and scale of violations and abuses of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in many parts of the world remain deeply troubling. Defending FoRB for all, and promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities, is a longstanding human rights priority for the UK Government. Bilaterally, Ministers and officials regularly raise specific cases of concern with different countries; we do not shy away from challenging those we believe are not meeting their obligations. Multilaterally, we work with the UN, G7, and other multilateral fora to promote FoRB. The UK Government regularly discusses human rights in Nigeria with the Nigerian authorities, stressing the importance of protecting and promoting human rights for all. During my visit to Nigeria in February, I met with community and religious leaders, with whom I discussed, among other things, the impact of the deteriorating security situation in Nigeria on local people, and their rights. I also discussed growing insecurity and violence with Nigeria's Vice President and Foreign Minister during my visit.

### **Mubarak Bala**

**20 May 2022 | 1303**

**Asked by: Emma Hardy**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what what discussions she has had with the Nigerian government on the imprisonment of Mubarak Bala for blasphemy; and if she will make a statement.

**Answering member: Vicky Ford | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

I [Minister Ford] raised concerns about Mr Bala's case, and the severity of his sentence, with Nigeria's Foreign Minister, Geoffrey Onyeama, earlier this month. The British High Commissioner has also engaged with the Kano State

Government and the Nigerian President's Chief of Staff, Ibrahim Gambari, to express our concerns. She has made clear the importance of protecting religious minorities, and promoting human rights for all. Officials at the British High Commission have also raised Mr Bala's case with the Nigerian National Human Rights Commission.

We will continue to follow developments in Mr Bala's case closely, and will continue to stress the importance of Mr Bala being treated in full accordance with his human rights, the rule of law, and the Nigerian constitutional right to freedom of religion or belief.

### **Bala Mubarak**

**26 Apr 2022 | 153848**

#### **Asked by: Ms Lyn Brown**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment she has made of (a) the impact on freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria of the sentencing of Mubarak Bala, the President of the Nigerian Humanist Association, for blasphemy and (b) procedural justice in that case; and if she has made any representations to authorities in Nigeria in relation to that case.

#### **Answering member: Vicky Ford | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK Government is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all and promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities. This is a longstanding human rights policy priority for the UK Government, and we look forward to hosting a global summit to promote FoRB later this year.

The UK Government has followed Mr Bala's case closely, and has raised his case on multiple occasions with the Nigerian authorities, including following his recent sentencing. We believe that the right of individuals to express opinions is essential to a free and open society. We are concerned by the severity and length of sentence received by Mr Bala at trial. The British High Commissioner has expressed these concerns to the Kano State Government and the Nigerian President's Chief of Staff. We will continue to follow developments in Mr Bala's case closely, and will continue to stress the importance of Mr Bala being treated in full accordance with his human rights, the rule of law, and the Nigerian constitutional right to freedom of religion or belief.

### **Pakistan: Blasphemy**

**31 Mar 2022 | 145993**

**Asked by: Sam Tarry**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent discussions officials in her Department have had with their counterparts in Pakistan on the so-called blasphemy laws and reported vigilante acts committed on British soil.

**Answering member: James Cleverly | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We raise this issue privately at the highest levels. We press for speedy and fair trials for those accused and urge the Pakistan authorities to ensure the safety of those released. On 23 and 24 June during a visit to Pakistan, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister for South Asia met Prime Minister Imran Khan, as well as other senior government ministers including Foreign Minister Qureshi and Human Rights Minister Mazari. During these meetings, he highlighted the need to address persecution, promote respect for all religions and increase tolerance for religious minorities. In March the High Commissioner also met senior representatives of the Christian faith and discussed blasphemy, as well as other issues around freedom of religion or belief. We will continue to urge the government of Pakistan to guarantee the fundamental rights of all its citizens, regardless of their religion or belief.

### **Business of the House**

**27 Jan 2022 | 707 c1118**

**Asked by: Jim Shannon**

It is always a pleasure to ask a question of the Leader of the House. Last week, Aneeqa Ateeq was found guilty of blasphemy and given a death sentence by a court in Lahore after sharing a message on social media. Aneeqa is one of 80 people imprisoned in Pakistan under blasphemy charges. Will the Leader of the House provide a statement on Her Majesty's Government's efforts to tackle blasphemy laws in Pakistan, given that that country is the largest beneficiary of UK aid?

**Answered by: Jacob Rees-Mogg | Leader of the House**

I am always grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising these important points about freedom of religion, ensuring that the Government are aware of them and that they are raised at the highest levels within Government.

Regrettably, I am not allowed to comment on individual cases. However, the Government remain concerned about the use of blasphemy laws in Pakistan. It is our long-standing policy to oppose the death penalty in all circumstances, as a matter of principle. UK aid in Pakistan targets the most marginalised and vulnerable communities, and the Government fund

programmes that work to address discrimination against minorities and gender-based violence, but of course Her Majesty's Government should use all the influence at their hand to protect freedom of religion.

### **Topical Questions**

**25 Jan 2022 | 707 c847**

#### **Asked by: Sir Edward Leigh**

The Minister will be aware that I have raised repeatedly the case of Maira Shahbaz, a 14-year-old Christian girl forcibly abducted, raped and forced into a marriage. Will the Minister assure me, given that we give hundreds of millions of pounds in aid to Pakistan, that we are insisting that aid is contingent on reform of the blasphemy laws and making sure that there are no forced conversions in that country?

#### **Answered by: James Cleverly | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

My right hon. Friend will understand why I will not go into specific details of that case. I can assure him that in our bilateral relationships with Pakistan and other countries where we are aid donors, we also ensure that we use that relationship to promote the values not just of tolerance but of protection of religious freedom. That is as true in Pakistan as it is in other areas, and it is an issue that my noble Friend Lord Ahmed raises bilaterally.

### **Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar**

**01 Jul 2021 | 23218**

#### **Asked by: Brendan O'Hara**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the findings of the Aid to the Church in Need, published 11 June 2021, that Islamist groups in Pakistan are inciting violence towards Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel who were recently acquitted after being on death row for blasphemy.

#### **Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK Government welcomes the recent acquittal of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel by the Lahore High Court. We remain concerned about the use of blasphemy laws in Pakistan, which are only compatible with international human rights law in narrow circumstances. It is our longstanding policy to oppose the death penalty in all circumstances as a matter of principle.

We regularly raise at a senior level our concerns about human rights with the Government of Pakistan. Most recently on 23 and 24 June during a visit to Pakistan, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon raised our human rights concerns with Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan, as well as other senior government ministers including Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, and Pakistan's Human Rights Minister, Shireen Mazari. Lord Ahmad also met with minority communities during the visit to understand better their concerns and the challenges they face.

We will continue to urge the government of Pakistan to guarantee the rights of all people in Pakistan, particularly the most vulnerable, as laid down in the Constitution of Pakistan and in accordance with international standards.

### **Pakistan: Blasphemy**

**19 May 2021 | 534**

#### **Asked by: Imran Ahmad Khan**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment his Department has made of the implications for its policies of reports that Christian nurses Mariam Lal and Navish Aroojtwo in Faisalabad, Pakistan, have been charged under that country's blasphemy statutes.

#### **Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK Government remains deeply concerned about reports of discrimination against the Christian community and other religious minorities in Pakistan. We regularly raise at a senior level our concerns regarding blasphemy laws with the Government of Pakistan. On 23 March, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister for South Asia, discussed Freedom of Religion or Belief with Pakistan's Special Representative for Religious Harmony, Tahir Ashrafi. On 20 February, Lord Ahmad raised our concerns about the protection of minority religious communities, including the use of blasphemy laws, with Pakistan's Human Rights Minister, Dr Shireen Mazari. We will continue to urge the government of Pakistan to guarantee the fundamental rights of all its citizens, regardless of their religion or belief.

### **Pakistan: Capital Punishment**

**12 Apr 2021 | HL14613**

#### **Asked by: Lord Alton of Liverpool**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what representations they have made to the government of Pakistan about (1) the death sentence imposed on Sajjad Masih Gill, and (2) the use of the death sentence in Pakistan; and what

response they have received (a) on this case, and (b) on the use of the death sentence.

**Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

It is the UK's longstanding policy to oppose the death penalty in all circumstances as a matter of principle. We are concerned about the case of Sajjad Masih Gill, who was sentenced to death in March 2021, after being convicted for blasphemy.

We do not comment on our handling of individual cases but regularly raise our concerns about blasphemy laws at a senior level with the Government of Pakistan. On 23 March, I discussed Freedom of Religion or Belief with Pakistan's Special Representative for Religious Harmony, Tahir Ashrafi. On 20 February, I also raised our concerns about the protection of minority religious communities, including the use of blasphemy laws, with Pakistan's Human Rights Minister, Dr Shireen Mazari.

**Pakistan: Blasphemy**

**08 Mar 2021 | 161820**

**Asked by: Dr Rupa Huq**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent discussions he has had with his Pakistani counterpart on the imprisonment of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel.

**Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK government is concerned about the use of blasphemy laws, which are only compatible with international human rights law in narrow circumstances. It is our longstanding policy to oppose the death penalty in all circumstances as a matter of principle. We are therefore concerned about the case of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, who were sentenced to death in 2014 after being convicted for blasphemy.

We regularly raise at a senior level our concerns about the human rights situation with the Government of Pakistan. Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for South Asia and Minister responsible for Human Rights, discussed Freedom of Religion or Belief, including the use of blasphemy laws, with Pakistan's Minister for Human Rights, Dr Shireen Mazari, on 20 February 2021. Lord Ahmad also raised concerns about the protection of religious minorities with Pakistan's Special Advisor to the Prime Minister for the Interior, Shahzad Akbar, on 7 December 2020.

### **Pakistan: Capital Punishment**

**20 Jul 2020 | 73879**

**Asked by: Patrick Grady**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what recent representations he has made to his Pakistani counterpart on (a) Shagufta Kauser, (b) Hussain Moosa and (c) other prisoners facing death sentences under blasphemy laws in that country.

**Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

We are concerned about the issue of blasphemy laws, which has affected both Muslims and non-Muslims. It is our longstanding policy to oppose the death penalty in all circumstances as a matter of principle. We continue to closely monitor, the case of Shagufta Kausar and her husband Shafqat Emmanuel, whose appeal hearing is delayed until September due to court closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The UK Government regularly raise our concerns about Freedom of Religion or Belief and blasphemy laws at a senior level with the Government of Pakistan. Most recently, the Minister of State for South Asia and human rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, raised concerns on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the death penalty with Dr Mazari, Pakistan's Human Right Minister, on 15 July. Lord Ahmad also raised our concerns regarding the blasphemy laws, including the case of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel, with Pakistan's High Commissioner to the UK, His Excellency Nafees Zakaria, on 23 June. The Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Rehman Chishti MP, has also spoken to the Pakistani High Commissioner to the UK about Freedom of Religion or Belief.

### **Pakistan: Christianity**

**22 Jun 2020 | 55971**

**Asked by: Jim Shannon**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what representations he has made to his Pakistani counterpart on releasing the Christian prisoners of conscience (a) Shagufta Kausar and (b) Shafqat Emmanuel detained in that country.

**Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

We continue to actively monitor the case of Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel who remain in detention in Pakistan. We understand that their hearing has been rescheduled to 22 June. We remain deeply concerned about reports of discrimination against the Christian community and other religious minorities in Pakistan.

We regularly raise at a senior level the issue of the blasphemy laws with the authorities in Pakistan. In Pakistan and elsewhere these laws have targeted Muslims and non-Muslims. The UK Government condemns any instance where the content or application of blasphemy legislation encourages or justifies violence or discrimination, or causes a violation of a person's Human Rights. The British High Commissioner to Pakistan met the Pakistan's Minister for Human Rights on 20 January and raised issues surrounding blasphemy and the death penalty, which the UK remains firmly opposed to in all circumstances. In February, the Minister for South Asia, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, raised the UK's concerns about the situation for prisoners in detention under trial in Pakistan, particularly for blasphemy cases. Most recently, Lord Ahmad raised our concerns about Freedom of Religion or Belief and the death penalty in Pakistan by letter with Dr Mazari on 5 June. In addition, The British High Commissioner to Pakistan, Christian Turner CMG, met with Dr Mazari and raised our concerns about Freedom of Religion or Belief and the death penalty on 8 June.

### **Pakistan: Blasphemy**

**15 Jul 2019 | HL16782**

#### **Asked by: Lord Alton of Liverpool**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the sentencing of Shagufta Kauser and her husband to death in Pakistan for alleged blasphemy; what assessment they have made of whether Shagufta Kauser is (1) from a Christian minority, and (2) illiterate; what representations they have made to the government of Pakistan on her behalf; what response they have received to these representations; and what estimate they have made of the number of people currently facing the death sentence in Pakistan for alleged blasphemy.

#### **Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

We continue to monitor the case of Shagufta Kauser and her husband Shafqat Emmanuel who were sentenced to death in April 2014. We understand that Shagufta Kauser is of the Christian faith and we are aware of media reports stating that she and her husband are both illiterate.

We regularly raise our concerns about the misuse of the blasphemy laws with the government of Pakistan at a senior level. The harsh penalties for blasphemy, including the death penalty, add to these concerns. We remain firmly opposed to the death penalty in all circumstances. We have repeatedly called upon the Government of Pakistan to end capital punishment and, as a minimum, commit to publicly renewing the previously imposed moratorium on the death penalty. Concerns about Freedom of Religion or Belief and the protection of minority religious communities were raised with Pakistan's



Federal Minister for Human Rights, Dr Shireen Mazari, during a ministerial visit to Islamabad in February.

We do not hold figures for individuals on specific charges overseas. According to the US State Department 2018 Report on Freedom of Religion or Belief, at the time of publication, 77 individuals were imprisoned in Pakistan on blasphemy charges, 28 of whom had received death sentences.

### **Business of the House**

**13 Jun 2019 | 661 c849**

#### **Asked by: Jim Shannon**

I again welcome the news that Asia Bibi has been relocated to Canada after being falsely accused of blasphemy in Pakistan. Unfortunately, the blasphemy laws are still in place, and are still being used to persecute religious minorities. In fact, the very cell that held Asia Bibi is now occupied by Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Masih, two Christians also falsely accused of blasphemy. Worse still, in February, upon hearing that four women had been accused of blasphemy, an angry mob attacked a Christian village, leading to the displacement of approximately 200 Christian families. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or debate on this very important issue?

#### **Answered by: Mel Stride | Leader of the House**

I thank my hon. Friend for raising this extremely important matter. We welcome reports that Asia Bibi has been able to travel freely and can now make decisions about her future. We are very concerned about the persecution of members of all religious minorities and the misuse of the blasphemy law, which is why in December, the Foreign Secretary announced an independent review of Foreign and Commonwealth Office support for persecuted Christians overseas. As to a debate, this would be an excellent subject for, perhaps, an Adjournment debate.

### **Pakistan: Blasphemy**

**22 May 2019 | HL15657**

#### **Asked by: Lord Alton of Liverpool**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the case of the Pakistani Christian woman, Shagufta Kauser, who, with her disabled husband, Shafqat Emmanuel, was sentenced to death in 2014, for allegedly sending blasphemous text messages, including reports that the couple are illiterate and that the messages were in English; and what representations they have made to the government of Pakistan about this case.

**Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

We are aware and are monitoring the case of Shagufta Kausar and her husband Shafqat Emmanuel. We remain deeply concerned about reports of discrimination against the Christian community and other religious minorities in Pakistan. We regularly raise our concerns about the misuse of the blasphemy laws with the government of Pakistan at a senior level.

I raised our concerns about Freedom of Religion or Belief and the protection of minority religious communities with Pakistan's Federal Minister for Human Rights, Dr Shireen Mazari, during my visit to Islamabad in February. The UK raised concerns about Freedom of Religion or Belief at Pakistan's UN Universal Periodic Review of human rights in November 2017. We urged Pakistan to strengthen the protection of minorities, including by establishing an independent National Commission for Minorities from all faith communities.

The UK remains firmly opposed to the death penalty in all circumstances. We have repeatedly called upon the Government of Pakistan to end capital punishment and, at a minimum, commit to publicly renewing the previously imposed moratorium on the death penalty.

We will continue to urge the Government of Pakistan to guarantee fully the rights of all Pakistani citizens, including religious minorities, and to honour its international obligations.

**Religious Freedom**

**06 Mar 2019 | HL13896**

**Asked by: Lord Alton of Liverpool**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what response they have received from representations they have made on behalf of (1) Pastor John Cao, (2) Mussie Ezaz, (3) Imran Ghafur Masih, (4) Mussie Eyob, (5) Mohammed Roghangir Mohammad, (6) Le Dinh Luong, (7) Nguyễn Văn Hoá, (8) Nguyễn Trung Tôn, (9) Bakhrom Kholmatov, (10) Hadi Asgari, (11) Amin Afshar Naderi, (12) Ebrahim Firouzi, (13) Qaisar and Amoon Ayub, (14) Abraham Ben Moses, (15) Shagufta Kausar, (16) Shafqat Emmanuel, (17) Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, (18) Saheb Fadaie, and (19) Yasser Mohammad Reza Omid, all of whom are prisoners of conscience who have reportedly been subject to torture.

**Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

The British Government regards Freedom of Religion or Belief as a universal human right which should be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere. We raise a range of cases, but cannot routinely discuss publicly the details of individual cases for the protection of those involved.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office encourages all States to uphold their international human rights obligations. Any allegations of human rights violations are concerning and must be thoroughly, promptly and transparently investigated.

## 4 Other Parliamentary material

### 4.1 Debate

#### [Pakistan: Aid Programmes and Human Rights](#)

02 Jul 2019 | House of Lords Grand Committee | 798 cc76-91GC

Lords question for short debate on what assessment they have made of the relationship between their aid programmes and human rights and the treatment of minorities in Pakistan, and in particular the case of Asia Bibi.

### 4.2 Early Day Motions

#### [Christian woman stoned in Sokoto, northern Nigeria](#)

EDM 95 (session 2022-23)

23 May 2022

Jim Shannon

That this House notes the horrific stoning of Deborah Yakubu, a young Christian woman in Sokoto, Northern Nigeria; further notes that the stoning took place after Ms Yakubu had expressed concern that a student What's App Group was being used inappropriately and she was subsequently accused of blasphemy; highlights that the body and school building were then torched in a further act of hatred and violence; and encourages the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to make contact with counterparts in Nigeria and urge them to ensure that justice is done and those responsible for her death are held accountable.

#### [Christian persecution in Nigeria](#)

EDM 200 (session 2021-22)

15 June 2021

Jim Shannon

That this House notes the recent report by Intersociety Rule of Law which stated that 1,470 Christians were murdered and over 2,200 were abducted by jihadists in the first four months of 2021 in Nigeria; further notes the increase in Blasphemy cases in Northern Nigeria resulting in long prison sentences; and calls upon the Secretary of State for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to engage with the Nigerian Government to apply diplomatic pressure to acknowledge the scale of the persecution and address this persecution with definitive action.

### **Blasphemy laws in Pakistan**

**EDM 106 (session 2021-22)**

**25 May 2021**

**Jim Shannon**

That this House notes with concern the Pakistani Government's recent public commitment to maintaining the country's blasphemy laws; expresses disappointment at the Pakistani Government's dismissal of evidence of the misuse of these laws against religious minorities; notes that false accusations of blasphemy are made with impunity and that Pakistan's own Supreme Court has observed the majority of blasphemy cases are based on false accusations stemming from personal or family vendettas; acknowledges that Pakistan's religious and belief minorities are disproportionately affected, with Pakistan's Christians making up just 1.6 per cent of the country's population but representing more than 15 per cent of those charged with blasphemy; is concerned by Amnesty International's reports of an alarming uptick in blasphemy accusations across Pakistan; denounces the vigilante violence that blasphemy accusations often incite; calls on the Governments of Pakistan, and the seven other countries in which blasphemy convictions carry death sentences, to stop the misuse of these laws; urges the Pakistani Government to release those languishing in prison held on unsubstantiated charges, including Christians Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel held since 2014 for allegedly sending blasphemous text messages; and further calls on the UK Government to follow the European Parliament's lead in re-examining trade relations with Pakistan due to that country's human rights record.

### **Commemoration of 10th Anniversary of Shahbaz Bhatti's Assassination**

**EDM 70 (session 2021-22)**

**18 May 2021**

**Jim Shannon**

That this House notes with concern the Pakistani Government's recent public commitment to maintaining that country's blasphemy laws; expresses disappointment at the Pakistani Government's dismissal of evidence of the misuse of those laws against religious minorities; notes that false accusations of blasphemy are made with impunity and that Pakistan's own Supreme Court has observed that the majority of blasphemy cases are based on false accusations stemming from personal or family vendettas; acknowledges that Pakistan's religious and belief minorities are disproportionately affected, with Pakistan's Christians making up just 1.6 per cent of the country's population but representing more than 15 per cent of those charged with blasphemy; is concerned by Amnesty International's reports of an alarming uptick in blasphemy accusations across Pakistan; denounces the vigilante violence that blasphemy accusations often incite; calls on the Government of Pakistan and the seven other countries in which blasphemy convictions carry death

sentences to stop the misuse of those laws; urges the Pakistani Government to release those languishing in prison held on unsubstantiated charges, including Christians Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel held since 2014 for allegedly sending blasphemous text messages; and further calls on the UK Government to follow the European Parliament's lead in re-examining trade relations with Pakistan.

**Blasphemy charges against Christian nurses Mariyum Lal and Newsh Arooj in Pakistan**

**EDM 1753 (session 2021-22)**

**20 April 2021**

**Jim Shannon**

That this House notes the blasphemy charges against Christian nurses Mariyum Lal and Newsh Arooj in Pakistan; highlights the attack on those nurses by members of staff within Faisalabad Civil Hospital in central Punjab; notes that the nurses were instructed to remove wall hangings and have been subjected to a personal vendetta; calls on the Punjab Police and Government to protect those nurses and further to drop the erroneous allegations; and further calls on the Foreign Secretary to intervene and apply diplomatic pressure to secure the well being of those two nurses and their families.

**Commemoration of 10th anniversary of Shahbaz Bhatti's assassination**

**EDM 1561 (session 2019-21)**

**1 March 2021**

**Jim Shannon**

That this House marks the 10th anniversary of Shahbaz Bhatti's assassination for his courageous advocacy for Pakistan's religious minorities; recognises that countless people across the world have died, or faced significant suffering, to protect rights which people mostly take for granted in the UK; laments the fact that, according to Pew Centre Research, four out of every five people live in countries in which there are significant restrictions on freedom of religion or belief; expresses deep concern at ongoing freedom of religion or belief violations in Pakistan such as the misuse of blasphemy laws and the forced conversion and marriage of over 1,000 girls annually; pledges to honour Mr Bhatti's legacy by continuing to advocate on behalf of religious and belief minorities in Pakistan and around the world; and calls on the British and Pakistani Governments to adopt the recommendations of the All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief's 2019 Report entitled Religious Minorities of Pakistan.

## 5

## Further reading

[The Commonwealth and Human Rights](#), Commons Library Briefing Paper, 30 August 2022

[The Commonwealth](#), Commons Library Briefing Paper, 14 July 2022

[The UK-hosted International Conference on the Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), Commons Library Debate Pack, 23 June 2022

[Persecution of Christians and religious minorities in India](#), Commons Library Debate Pack, 22 February 2022

[Violence against Christians in central African countries](#), Commons Library Debate Pack, 21 September 2021

[Persecution of Muslims, Christians and minority groups in India](#), Commons Library Debate Pack, 11 January 2021

[The APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief](#) (Website)

[All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief](#) (Membership)

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