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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[13 February 2017]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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End religious persecution in Pakistan

Religious minorities have been subject to recurrent discrimination, harassment and religiously motivated violence in Pakistan for decades, but their persecution by militant groups and extremists is not less urgent and relevant for it. According to the 2015 report by the U.S. Commission on International Freedom, Pakistan today represents one of the worst cases worldwide regarding religious freedom. A climate of religious intolerance, vigilantism and impunity was created in the course of molding an Islamic State in Pakistan and promulgating additional blasphemy laws under the rule of Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s. Since then, accusations based on religious offences and numbers of people extra-judicial murders have largely increased. Society for Threatened Peoples is convinced that there will be no sustainable interreligious harmony in Pakistan without repealing sections 295, 295-A, 295-B, 295-C, 298-A, 298-B and 298-C of Pakistan's Penal Code, also known as blasphemy laws.

Unfortunately, due to the fear of Islamic extremists in Pakistan, the government has done little to interfere and stop social violence and discrimination by the authorities against religious minorities. Especially Shia Muslims, Christians, Ahmadis, and Hindus are often falsely accused of blasphemy based on ulterior motives like property disputes or personal and family revenge. Clergies and angry mobs pressure the police to register cases and the respective judge to condemn the defendants despite little evidence. In a climate of impunity, there are no charges against wrong accusations and violence; the perpetrators are instead being hailed as heroes. Corruption and vaguely formulated laws as well as the absence of the presumption of innocence and the intention as an element of the question of guilt make the blasphemy laws even more vulnerable to misuse.

Every month, charities and human rights organizations publish new reports on repeated personal, structural or institutional attacks on religious minorities in Pakistan. There is an unending spiral of violence by extremist militants against minority groups. Their freedom of religion and expression is severely restricted. To make matters worse, members of minorities are living in constant danger of forced conversions and marriages, kidnappings, rapes, murders, accusations and unfair trials, attacks and devastations of their homes and religious sights. The government of Pakistan ignores their basic human rights, fails to protect the safety of these citizens and to enforce the rule of law.

The international community should call upon Pakistan to respect and protect its religious minorities and to work towards an abolition of the blasphemy laws. Pending repeal, the death penalty should be removed for convictions under Section 295-C (use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet) and all accused and condemned prisoners for blasphemous acts should be released immediately. As a matter of fact, this is a highly sensitive recommendation in Pakistan, which requires support in preventing extremism by public education programs that promote the values of tolerance, non-discrimination, non-violence, and the respect for human rights in an atmosphere of an interreligious dialogue. Procedural and institutional safeguards must be established to prevent governmental and private vigilantism and misuse of the blasphemy laws. These include fair trials as signed in the ICCPR 2008 and legal actions against all malicious acts endangering freedom of religion and expression to prevent more violence. Moreover, effective protection must be ensured against violence in the name of religion for suspects, persecutor, lawyers, witnesses, and police in blasphemy proceedings and the places of worship of religious minorities.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the UN Human Rights Council:

- To urge the government of Pakistan to form a statutory framework which applies to all citizen of Pakistan equally and regardless of their religion,
- To urge the government of Pakistan to abolish the blasphemy laws and, pending repeal, to remove the death penalty for convictions under Section 295-C,

- To urge the government of Pakistan to establish procedural and institutional safeguards to prevent vigilantism and the misuse of blasphemy laws. All perpetrators of vigilantism need to be brought before justice and all suspects need to be given fair trials,
 - To support the government of Pakistan in developing and performing public education programs against extremism.
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