



Human Rights and Minorities

Freedom of Individuals

A society cannot be called civilized in the modern world if it is not protecting human rights of its individuals, irrespective of their color, caste and creed. There is no freedom without rights. Similarly, an era of prosperity is impossible without recognizing and respecting the intrinsic value of every individual, without granting him/her, without reserve, his/her legitimate human rights. A State cannot achieve its goals in any walk of life without ensuring basic rights to its people including their participation in national affairs, freedom of expression, provision of jobs, education, health etc.

The Ministry of Human Rights (MoHR), in collaboration with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has started an 'Initiation Plan' with project title "Strengthening, Enabling and Coordinating Rights and Empowerment in Pakistan.

The purpose of the 'Initiation Plan' is to initiate pilot activities leading to the finalization of framework to support human rights institutions, systems and processes in Pakistan. The project will support capacity development, civic education and coordination, emphasizing inclusion and engagement of relevant partners and stakeholders to promote and protect human rights in line with Pakistan's national and international commitments.

Another project of MoHR's capacity-building has been chalked out to promote human rights and fulfill the international obligations, responsibilities and actions of national stakeholders. The Ministry also signed an MoU with The Asia Foundation (TAF) on February 18, 2009 for mutual understanding and collaboration for strengthening the protection and promotion of human rights in Pakistan.

In pursuance of the MoU, the Ministry in collaboration with TAF and Zia Siddique Foundation (ZSF), has launched human rights promotion activities with funding of Rs.19,96,125 from TAF. Under the program, ZSF arranged human rights promotion activities including arrangement of four seminars in collaboration with MoHR.

To combat the human rights situation emerging from armed conflict and battle in Swat and Malakand, MoHR signed an agreement with the United Nations Children Educational Fund (UNICEF) on "Human Rights-Based Protection of Children Affected by Armed Conflict" on June 5, 2009. In pursuance of the agreement, MoHR is carrying out activities with financial assistance of Rs.4 million from the UNICEF. The activities include conducting a situation analysis on protection of children in *madressahs* in Pakistan. They also include developing an advocacy kit on children affected by armed conflict for Parliamentarians; conducting hearing sessions with parliamentarians; monitoring and reporting on the violation of child rights; and awareness-raising events through media.

The Ministry registered 11,004 cases of violation of human rights in 2009, which were reported by the Regional Directorates of Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, and Quetta. 2,131 cases have been reported from Punjab; 5,895 from Sindh; 2,155 from Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa; and 823 from Balochistan. In local affairs section of MoHR, 22 murder cases, 16 rape cases, seven burn/acid throwing cases, 70 complaints against Police, 23 complaints against Jail, 34 land dispute cases, two torture cases, four missing persons complaints, and 26 matters related to minorities were reported during 2009-2010.

Whereas four cases of sale of human organs, four cases of *karo kari*, two cases of forced marriages, 13 cases of life protection, one case of illegal detention, four family matters/complaint against husband, four kidnapping incidents, one complaint filed by working women, one case of human trafficking, two cases of political complaints, one NGOs related matter, 39 cases of financial assistance, 16 miscellaneous cases, 53 service reinstatement cases, and two drug trafficking cases were reported during this period.

Protecting Minorities

The Ministry of Minorities has, as part of its duty to safeguard the rights of all religious minorities living in Pakistan, decided to introduce Minority Protection Bill as a landmark legislation aiming to ensure that all the political, economic, and social rights of non-Muslims will be protected as enunciated in the 1973 Constitution. The Government has decided to introduce laws to regulate and legalize the marriages of Hindus, Sikhs, Bahais and Parsis – under the Sikh Marriage Act, the Hindu Marriage Act, the Bahai Marriage Act, and the Parsi Marriage Act -- and these bills will be moved to the National Assembly for enactment as acts of parliament. These legislations will satisfy non-Muslim communities, which have long been demanding laws to protect their marriages and other matrimonial matters.

The Government has earmarked a quota of 5% for minorities' representation in federal services. The MoM is actively engaged in efforts to ensure the welfare of minorities, their protection against discrimination and the representation of Pakistan in international bodies and conferences relating to minorities, including the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination against Minorities, international agreements and commitment.

A policy on the Evacuee Trust Property is being strictly implemented. It has declared August 11 as Minorities' Day every year, since it coincides with the first speech of the father of the nation, Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, delivered at the First Constituent Assembly, in which he had declared Pakistan as a State where all the people will be equal citizens and where there will be no discrimination against them on the basis of their caste, color and faith.

Simultaneously, the Government enhanced to Rs.147 million the allocation for small schemes for minorities' development in 2008-2009. The allocation executed 135 such schemes across the country. Financial assistance was provided to 8,286 needy non-Muslims the same year. The MoM also disbursed Rs.14 million on scholarships to 3,000 needy non-Muslims in 2008-2009. An amount of Rs.8 million was spent on minorities' repatriation to Swat and other areas of Malakand division on the provision of food, shelter, health and educational facilities. The total outlay for MoM was raised from Rs.75 million to Rs.166 million in 2008-2009.

The People's Government also helped Christians who fell victims to violence at village Bahmani Wala, Distt Kasur, and Gojra. The Government approved huge funds to provide the victims financial and legal aid. The Prime Minister and the Minister In-Charge visited the affected places, got FIR lodged against miscreants, and gave Rs.100,000 to the legal heirs of the deceased.

Creating Interfaith Harmony By Capt. (r) Syed Wasif

“Pakistan Peoples Party recognizes that minorities have equal rights as citizens in Pakistan.”

Pakistan Peoples Party Manifesto 1967

The People's Government has steadfastly pursued guidelines laid down in the historic address by the Father of the Nation, Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, on August 11, 1947 as well as the vision of the party's founding chairman, Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto regarding the status and position of minorities in Pakistan. The President and the Prime Minister have not only been very vocal in their support of minorities in the country but have also backed their claims by deeds, turning promises into actions.

The total outlay for the MoMA was never more than Rs.75 million, which was enhanced to Rs.166 million in 2008-2009. This is indicative of the high priority attached to the uplift of minorities. For the first time in Pakistan's history, 5% job quota for minorities has been reserved in federal services. Three thousand deserving students of minorities have been provided scholarships with an amount of Rs.16 million. A fund of Rs.32 million has also been granted to help the deprived and the needy in the minority communities. Skill development centers for vocational training of minorities are being established throughout the country.

The People's Government has declared of August 11 as “Minority Day”. Ten religious festivals of minorities are officially celebrated in Pakistan including Besahki, Dewali, Holi, Eid-e-Rizwan, Chelumjusst, Nauroze, Christmas and Easter. In 2008-2009, Rs.147 million was approved for 135 small development schemes and uplift of minorities' religious places.

For the first time in Pakistan, the People's Government has planned to provide representation to minorities in the Senate. A case has been moved by MoMA through Ministry of Law and Justice. A case has also been taken up with the Ministry of Law and Justice for the removal of discriminatory laws against minorities.

Responding to the distress cause, MoMA immediately helped the victims of heinous incidents in Kasur, Gojra, Korian and Sialkot. The Federal Minister immediately visited these places and addressed the issues and provided moral and financial help to the victims. A hotline is being established in MoMA through which competent staff will be posted round the clock to ensure timely redressal of minorities' grievances. Minorities in Pakistan are also suffering because of the wave of terrorism in the country. The MoMA has spent Rs.8 million for relief package of minority IDPs in addition to provision of food, shelter, health and educational facilities for them.

The need of the hour for different communities is to have a better understanding of each other. In this respect, Inter-Faith Harmony Committees are being established throughout the country at district level. An Inter-Faith Complex is being planned in Islamabad for promoting tolerance amongst different religions in the country, thus helping to create a peaceful Pakistan as envisioned by our forefathers.

Captain Syed Wasif is editorial head of Pakistan Television News, Islamabad.