

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 26, 2016

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry,

We, the members of the Ahmadiyya Caucus in the United States Congress, write to seek your urgent action in support of two Ahmadi Muslims—80-year old optician Abdul Shakoor and newspaper editor Tahir Mehdi—who remain in a Pakistani prison after being convicted on baseless charges of terrorism and blasphemy. These cases demonstrate that Pakistan's current government, even as it is vowing to crack down on the Taliban and other militants, is in fact furthering the ideology of hatred through its persecution of Ahmadi Muslims and other minority groups.

Pakistan has a dismal record on religious freedom, and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in particular suffers some of the worst forms of persecution. Under the 1974 Constitution, Ahmadi Muslims are considered non-Muslim. In 1984, then-military ruler Zia ul Haq enacted the so-called "blasphemy laws," two of which are known as the anti-Ahmadi criminal codes because of their specific targeting of Ahmadi Muslims. Ahmadis account for almost 40% of all arrests under the blasphemy laws. By an Executive Order, Ahmadis are disenfranchised: in order to vote, they must either declare that they are non-Muslim or sign a statement denouncing Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Community, as a false prophet. In Pakistan's most populous province, Punjab, the legislature banned Ahmadi books and newspapers (including the daily newspaper *Al-Fazl*, where Mr. Mehdi is the editor), banned Ahmadis from holding any public meetings (even as militant clerics are given free rein to preach hatred against Ahmadis) and changed the name of Rabwah, a town that is home to tens of thousands of Ahmadis.


Unsurprisingly, this regime of systematic legal discrimination against Ahmadi Muslims has fueled brutal attacks against the Ahmadi community. Just last November, after a worker in an Ahmadi-owned factory in Jehlum, Punjab, made a false allegation of blasphemy against the owners, a mob of militant religious extremists proceeded to set both the factory and a local Ahmadi mosque on fire. In 2010, after months of hateful propaganda against Ahmadi Muslims by the Punjab government (including billboards stating that friendship with Ahmadis amounted to treason against the prophet Muhammad), the Pakistan Taliban carried out simultaneous attacks against two Ahmadi mosques, brutally murdering more than 80 Ahmadis and wounding scores more.


Even as Pakistan's government has amassed new powers purportedly in a bid to eradicate militancy, it is using that authority to further persecute Ahmadi Muslims. Pakistan's National Action Plan (NAP) was intended to crack down on hate speech and literature intended to provoke sectarian violence. Ironically, it is the literature of the victims of sectarian violence that Pakistani authorities are targeting, and instead of protecting the victims, they are prosecuting them for seditious and treasonous activities. It's hard to comprehend how an 80-year-old optician like Mr. Shakoor could be tried as a terrorist.

The trumped-up charges against Mr. Shakoor and Mr. Mehdi are cases in point. Shakoor was arrested last November on charges that he had sold Ahmadi publications. By selling these books (which reflect the peaceful teachings of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community and denounce any form of violence in the name of religion), the government alleged he was guilty of stirring "religious hatred" and "sectarianism" from his optical store. Mr. Shakoor was tried and convicted in an anti-terrorism court after a trial of less than three weeks. He was sentenced to five years of imprisonment under the anti-Ahmadi laws and anti-terrorism legislation. Similarly, blasphemy and terrorism charges have been brought against Tahir Mehdi, the editor of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community's daily newspaper *Al-Fazl*, a 102-year old publication. Mr. Mehdi, charged on the basis that he was publishing and circulating a banned newspaper, has been denied bail and faces a three-year prison sentence.


As these tragic cases demonstrate, Pakistan's commitment to eradicating terrorism is seriously in doubt. We urge you, Mr. Secretary, to use your office to place additional pressure on Pakistan to effectuate the National Action Plan in a manner that protects, not prosecutes, vulnerable religious minorities. Only when Pakistan ceases persecution of its citizens on account of their faith, and restores religious freedom for all Pakistanis, will it be able to effectively combat the ideology that fans the Taliban and other militants.


Sincerely,


Jackie Speier


Gerald E. Connolly


Eddie Bernice Johnson


Ted Poe


Anna G. Eshoo


Zoe Lofgren

Pete King

Peter King