

Islamabad: Pakistan's Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti has been shot dead by gunmen who lurked his car in the capital, Islamabad when he was leaving for some official work from his home. His car was sprayed with bullets, police said.

The minister had not been accompanied by his guards or any other security escort vehicle that is standard for all ministers.

Shahbaz Bhatti, was the cabinet's only Christian minister, and had received several death threats for urging reforms to blasphemy laws. In January, Punjab's Governor Salman Taseer, who had also opposed the law, was shot dead by one of his bodyguards. The governor had backed a private member's bill in parliament by Sherry Rehman, a female MP, to amend the blasphemy law in an attempt to make miscarriages of justice less likely and remove its death penalty. But in the face of strident popular opposition, the federal government said it would not support the proposed reforms. Sherry Rehman said last month she was receiving death threats every half hour by e-mail and telephone.

The blasphemy law carries a death sentence for anyone who insults Islam. Critics say it has been used to persecute minority faiths.

Pamphlets by al-Qaeda and Tehrik-i-Taliban Punjab, a branch of the Taliban in Pakistan were found at the scene. Tehrik-i-Taliban's deputy spokesman, Ahsanullah Ahsan took the responsibility and said that, "This man was a blasphemer of the Prophet Muhammad P.B.U.H" and "We will continue to target all those who speak against the law which punishes those who insult the prophet, their fate will be the same."

"This is a concerted campaign to slaughter every liberal, progressive and humanist voice in Pakistan," Farahnaz Ispahani, an aide to President Asif Ali Zardari, told AP news agency.

Bhatti's credentials

Shahbaz Bhatti, son of Jacob Bhatti, was born on September 9, 1968, in Lahore, Punjab.

He was one of the founding members of All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA) in 1985. He was chairman of All Pakistan Minorities Alliance, Founder and President of the Christian Liberation Front, and the Executive Director of the Pakistan Council for Human Rights.

Bhatti joined Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in 2002. He was elected member of the National Assembly on a seat reserved for minorities. He was made Federal Minister for minorities in year 2008. After last month's cabinet resizing, Bhatti retained his office.

He was the first ever Pakistani to receive International Religious Freedom Award for rendering services to the community. He was a bachelor and have four brothers and one sister. His father died last month in Faisalabad. He was living in Sector I-8/4, Islamabad. As federal minister, Bhatti took stern measures to ensure safety of religious minorities while he launched national campaign to promote interfaith and harmony through seminars, awareness groups, and workshop.

World Condemns Bhatti's Assassination

World leaders expressed outrage and termed as "unspeakable", "unacceptable" and a "dastardly crime" the slaying of Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, also calling it an attack on the values of tolerance.

US President Barack Obama said that the killers of a Pakistani minister must be brought to justice and said he was saddened by the "horrific" assassination. "I am deeply saddened by the assassination of Pakistan's Minister for Minorities Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti today in Islamabad, and condemn in the strongest possible terms this horrific act of violence," Obama said.

British Prime Minister David Cameron said the assassination of Bhatti was "absolutely brutal and unacceptable". He said the minister's murder showed what a huge problem we have in our world with intolerance. "I will send not only our condolences but our clearest possible message to the government and people of Pakistan that this is simply unacceptable," he said.

United Nations Human Rights chief, Navi Pillay, urged the Pakistan government to support reforms of the country's blasphemy law as she condemned the killing of Bhatti. "I urge the government of Pakistan to honour the courageous stand of Bhatti and former Punjab governor

Salmaan Taseer by supporting their position on the blasphemy law," the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said in a statement.

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and opposition Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff expressed "shock and outrage and anger" in parliament over the killing. In a statement, Harper also said, "Canada stands against those who commit gutless acts of murderous violence and extremism, and calls for the Pakistani authorities bring those responsible to justice."

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed outrage over the murder of Bhatti. "I was shocked and outraged by the assassination," Clinton told a US Senate committee. "I think this was an attack not only on one man but on the values of tolerance and respect for people of all faiths and backgrounds that had been championed by Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan," she said.

German Federal Foreign Minister, Dr Guido Westerwelle, expressed his shock and dismay over the assassination of Bhatti. "He was the only Christian who was passionately committed to the rights of minorities in Pakistan," Westerwelle said while talking to press in Berlin.

The Indian government condemned the assassination, calling it a "dastardly crime". "We convey our heartfelt condolences to the bereaved family, the people and the government of Pakistan on the tragic assassination of Bhatti," the Indian foreign ministry said in a statement.

The Vatican condemned as "unspeakable" the murder of Bhatti and called for an end to the persecution of Christians. "The attack is a new act of violence of a terrible gravity," said papal spokesman Federico Lombardi.

UK Minister for South Asia, Alistair Burt, said the assassination of Bhatti marked a new low point in Pakistan's struggle against violent religious extremism.

Credits: News Agencies/BBC/Daily Times/Express Tribune