



Target government aid at Pakistan's persecuted minorities

British aid does not appear to be reaching Pakistan's destitute minorities. DfID must account for the destination of this money and where it is spent, writes **Lord Alton**

Next week the Lords will have a short debate on the plight of Pakistan's minorities, whose shocking treatment came into sharp focus through the case of Asia Bibi – wrongly condemned to death and incarcerated for nine years under Pakistan's Blasphemy laws. Pakistan's Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, and other minorities – like the last remaining 4,000 Kalash, clinging to a precarious existence in three remote valleys of Pakistan – all face shocking persecution and discrimination.

Last autumn, during a visit to Islamabad and Lahore, with two members of the Commons, Marie Rimmer and Jim Shannon, our group saw first-hand the appalling conditions in the apartheid-style "colonies" in which many from the minorities are forced to live. We saw families living in hovels with dirt floors, in shacks without running water or electricity; little education or health provision; squalid and primitive conditions – all completely off the DfID radar. Thousands upon thousands of people are condemned to lives of destitution and misery. We heard first hand testimonies – including horrific accounts of abductions, child marriages, rape and forced

conversions – met politicians, religious leaders, and activists from civil society.

We were able to meet members of the Supreme Court and were given a promise that Asia Bibi's case would finally go to appeal.

It is to the great credit of Pakistan's most senior Judges that they defied rioters and lynch mobs – and that Asia and her children were finally allowed to travel to Canada – although, sadly, the UK refused to take her.

Don't under-estimate the bravery of the decision of those Judges. When the Christian Minister for Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti – and his friend, Salman Taseer, the Muslim Governor of the Punjab – spoke up for Asia Bibi and called for reforms to the Blasphemy Laws, both men were murdered.

And Asia's case is only one of many.

By some estimates, more than 70 people are currently on death-row for alleged blasphemy crimes. Asia's cell in the prison at Multan is already occupied by another illiterate Christian woman. She, and her disabled husband – both unable to read or write – face execution for allegedly sending blasphemous texts in English.

Over several years I have raised Asia Bibi's case and called for reforms to protect

minorities – in line with the founding principles of Pakistan – set out in Mohammed Ali Jinnah's commendable Constitution.

But those principles have proved worthless to the two children forced to watch a lynch mob of 1,200 burn alive their parents; worthless, when no one is brought to justice for the murder of Shahbaz Bhatti; worthless, when 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls are forcibly married and converted; worthless to Sadaf Masih, a 13-year old girl who was kidnapped, forcibly converted and married earlier this year in Punjab and to two Hindu girls, kidnapped, forcibly converted, and married within hours in Sindh; worthless to the children from minorities working in brick kilns, workshops, factories or as domestic servants; worthless to Iqbal Masih, an incredibly brave 12-year-old Christian boy, shot dead for rebelling against enslavement; worthless to girls from minorities now being sold in faith-led trafficking to Chinese gangs; and worthless to minorities who are ghettoised into squalid colonies and forced to clean latrines and sweep streets.

Over the past decade, £2.6bn of British aid has poured into Pakistan – on average, that is £383,000 every single day. But failure to differentiate how and where we spend this money leads DfID to say that it has no idea how much of the aid reaches these destitute, desperate minorities.

The British Government must reassess the basis on which it spends UK money; why it doesn't reach beleaguered minorities; insist on the removal of hate material from text books in schools and colleges; protest against discriminatory adverts reserving menial jobs for the minorities; ask why the provision of an affirmative action programme, endorsed by the Constitution, is not implemented; and ask what we have done to help those who have fled.

And Pakistan only needs to re-examine its own foundation principles to see that it is failing its minorities who face shocking discrimination and outright persecution. How a country treats its minorities is always a crucial litmus test. ■



Lord Alton of Liverpool is a Crossbench peer and co-chair of the Pakistan Minorities APPG. His debate is on Tuesday 2 July