**All-Party Parliamentary Working Group for the Pakistani Minorities**

**Legacy of Shahbaz Bhatti, Parliamentary Event – 2nd March 2020**

**Talk - Shahbaz Bhatti – Martyr of Faith and Conscience**

First of all, a huge thank you to Mr Shannon and Councillor Morris Johns for the invitation to come and speak to you on this anniversary of the passing of Shahbaz Bhatti, a man I was so honoured to meet on one of my visits to Pakistan.

Nine years on from his death, his haunting words spoken to camera on the eve of his assassination are as powerful now as when they were first uttered: “**I am being threatened by the forces of violent militant, banned organisations – the Taliban and Al Qaeda who want to impose their radical philosophy on Pakistan. Anyone who stands against them they threaten. But I am ready to die for a cause. I’m living for my community… and I will die to defend their rights**.”

These words were not spoken into a vacuum. In predicting his own timely death, he wasn’t vaingloriously seeking a martyr’s crown. He was speaking the truth about the threat to minority groups, including Christians and indeed all those – including many Muslims – who do not conform to an extremist vision for Pakistan. The need to expose this truth and build a more equal society explain why Shahbaz Bhatti gave his life. And, while the human body, frail as it is, can be killed and put to dust, the truth has an uncanny way of surviving the assassin’s bullet.

I met Shahbaz Bhatti in February 2006. As Head of Press and Information for the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, a role I still hold 14 years on, I met Shahbaz while I was travelling in Pakistan with ACN’s head of projects and the organisation’s projects coordinator for Asia-Africa. We travelled by car with Shahbaz to Kashmir. We had come to see the situation in the wake of the October 2005 earthquake. With a magnitude of 9.7, the earthquake claimed the lives of 87,000 or more people. A further 75,000 or more had been injured and a mind-boggling 2.8 million were displaced. As a charity, Aid to the Church in Need, had been asked by the bishops in Pakistan to provide some emergency support. So as we set about the task, who could we ask to help open up a channel of aid to provide the urgently-need emergency provisions? None other than Shahbaz Bhatti.

And, here we were, five months on, coming to see the situation on the ground and Shahbaz had come to meet us to escort us into Kashmir. Nothing seemed to be too much trouble for him. His vision, as he explained the work he and others were doing, was to help anyone in urgent need, irrespective of faith. I took a picture of him standing in front of one of the tarpaulin tents in Kashmir which ACN aid had provided. On the journey both there and back, he told us about the organisation he himself had founded – the All Pakistan Minorities’ Alliance.

Back then, I am quite sure that even he, with all his undoubted political skill, could not have quite predicted the trajectory his career would take, how in barely two and a half years he would be named Federal Minister for Minorities, becoming the only Christian in the Cabinet. But what he would have known is that, whatever path his life was to take him, nothing – power, prestige, privilege, the lot – none of it would stop him from pursuing his vision of a society in which all Pakistanis are able to play a part.

Devout Christian as he was, Shahbaz was as proud of being a Pakistani as any devotee of the *Quaid-e-Azam*, Mahammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. The founder father made no secret of his determination to prevent the new country from becoming a theocracy. As he said, when Pakistan first came into being in August 1947: “**You may belong to any religion, or caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the state**.”

Many years have passed since those words were spoken but for minority groups in Pakistan this dream that Jinnah had for Pakistan is as far as ever from coming true. In Aid to the Church in Need’s *Persecuted and Forgotten,* the reports on persecution of Christians that I have edited ever since the initiative began in 2006, not a year goes by in which Pakistan does not feature prominently. And more times than not, we have concluded that the situation for minorities is getting worse.

And yet, in pockets within the country, the situation on the ground reveals a very different picture. I have travelled three times to Khushpur, the Christian village near Faisalabad which Shahbaz was from. As a largely Christian town, the folk live up to the name, Khushpur, which means in Urdu ‘land of happiness’.

But in so many other parts of Pakistan, the country’s Christians – who number 4 million or more – live in a context of great oppression.

In some parts of the country, up to **90** percent of Christians are illiterate. Again and again, official school text books have been found to contain anti-Christian hatred.

Uneducated and despised in the schoolroom, for reasons related to their religion, most Christians can only expect to become cleaners, sanitary workers, manual workers – and I have seen them working dawn to dusk out in the searing heat, working as brick kiln labourers.

As a Catholic charity, Aid to the Church in Need is doing whatever it can to help give Christians hope in a situation where they could so easily be tempted to despair. We are providing catechesis – Christian education, supporting seminarians, Sisters and priests, building and repairing chapels, providing Child’s Bibles.

And we are providing legal and para-legal aid for the victims of blasphemy.

In Pakistan the penalty for defiling the Quran, the Sacred Islamic text is death. And anyone caught disrespecting the Prophet of Islam is liable to receive the death sentence.

Since these ordinances were included in the Pakistan Penal Code, more than **230** Christians have been accused of blasphemy. Although Christians are barely **1.5** percent of the population, Christians represent **15** percent of blasphemy cases. For Ahmadi Muslims, it is even worse **506 – one third.**

We know that in many such cases, the supposed perpetrator has committed no such crime. I have spoken to people accused of blasphemy and who have been forced to live in hiding, their whole lives, home, their businesses, their whole way of life ruined.

Shahbaz understood this and he dared call out the injustice. He did so knowing full well the consequences. It is worth noting that Tareek-e-Libaak, the party that claimed responsibility for his assassination were the same organisation that went on the rampage following the Supreme Court of Pakistan’s sensational decision to acquit Asia Bibi.

Indeed, the case of Asia Bibi, which Shahbaz personally championed, shows what can be achieved by shining the light of truth on a situation of profound injustice. Working closely with Mr Chishti, Aid to the Church in Need highlighted the Asia Bibi case by bringing over members of her family – her daughter, Eisham, and husband, Ashiq – to tell their story and appeal for her release. In fulfilling Shahbaz’s legacy, we need to come together in public acts demanding justice for the many other victims of injustice in Pakistan.

Shahbaz Bhatti died for a cause. He hands the baton to us and in taking up the challenge, we should be inspired by that same sense of conviction to

* To raise minorities out of illiteracy
* To stamp out religious hatred – and other forms of hatred – in schools
* To fight for equal opportunities in the workplace
* To bring justice for those unfairly accused of blasphemy
* To ensure the rule of law is applied and extremist militant groups are stopped.

And the UK has the leverage to bring change through its DfID aid budget for Pakistan. It is time that there was more accountability as regards where the money is spent, who benefits and how. And if this aid is not proving successful in tackling extremism, perhaps it is time for a fundamental rethink.

In marking the passing of this great man, let us be emboldened by his words spoken on the eve of his assassination. When asked about the death threats he was receiving, Shahbaz said: **“I know what is the meaning of the cross. I am following the Cross and I am ready to die for this cause. I am living for my community, my suffering people and I will die to defend their rights. Threats and warnings cannot change my principles. I would prefer to die for my principles and for the justice of my community than to compromise in the face of these threats.”**