

Pak Islamists criticize Pope's anti-blasphemy law comments

Islamabad, January 12: An alliance of Pakistani Islamist organisations said they would hold rallies to protest Pope Benedict XVI's remarks that called on the country to scrap an anti-blasphemy law which allows for the death penalty for insulting Islam. "The Pope's statement is part of a conspiracy to pit the world's religions against each other," said Sahibzada Fazal Karim, a member of Pakistan's parliament and the leader of Sunni Ittehad, an alliance of eight Sunni Muslim groups, according to Dawn newspaper.

Speaking on Monday during an address to diplomats accredited to the Holy See, Benedict called on governments to do more to protect Christians who have recently been the victims of violence in Egypt, Nigeria and Iraq.

He also called for the abolition of the blasphemy law in Pakistan. Punjab governor Salman Taseer, who was assassinated last week, supported a Christian woman awaiting execution under the blasphemy law.

"I once more encourage the leaders of that country to take the necessary steps to abrogate that law, all the more so because it is clear that it serves as a pretext for acts of injustice and violence against religious minorities," Benedict said.

Karim called the pope's comments a "violation of the UN's charter of peace," saying they meddled in a sovereign country's internal affairs.

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