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April 25, 2012 - Punta Cana, Dominican Republic...Amireh Al-Haddad/IRLA

Shaharya Gill, one of the more than 800 people from around the world who have traveled to Punta Cana to attend the 7th World Congress, understands the challenges to religious freedom in Pakistan-he grew up there. Now working as an associate counsel for the American Center for Law and Justice, an advocacy organization based in Washington, DC, he helps to oversee religious freedom cases in the country of his birth.

Among the biggest challenges to religious liberty in Pakistan are the so-called Blasphemy Laws. These laws prohibit any action or words against Islam, including defiling a place of worship or a sacred object, defiling the Quran or demeaning the prophet Mohammad. Punishment for such offenses includes fines, imprisonment and even the death penalty.

Gill notes that since these laws were passed about 30 years ago there have been about 1,000 charges against Christians in Pakistan. Worse still, says Gill, "Most cases are filed because one person wants another person's property."

One of Gill's current cases involves a bookstore owner who was falsely accused of violating the blasphemy laws, apparently in an attempt to gain his property. Cases like these, the law dictates, must go not only go before the court, but also before a Muslim judge. Unfortunately, says Gill, the question now has become how to discern true blasphemers from covetous accusers.

Other recent cases, such as that of Asia Bibi-the young Christian woman sentenced to death in the Pakistan's Punjab Province-have focused international attention on the impact of the Blasphemy Laws on members of Pakistan's minority faiths. Last year, both Pakistan's Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, and Punjab Governor Salman Taseer were assassinated after publicly supporting re-examination of the Blasphemy Laws.

For now, the outlook for many Christians and members of minority faiths in Pakistan remains grim. And religious liberty advocates, such as Gill, will continue their efforts to fight for the right of every person to worship according to the dictates of conscience.
Whether it's involvement in local religious freedom issues or helping to change the situation for believers in Laos or Vietnam, the presence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private citizens is essential to the promotion and protection of religious liberty, three experts said April 24, 2012.

Speaking at the International Religious Liberty Association's Seventh World Congress in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic, Knox Thames, Director of Policy and Research for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (CIRF); Ambassador Robert Seiple, president of the Center for America's First Freedom and an IRLA board member; and Richard T. Foltin, Director of National and Legislative Affairs for the American Jewish Committee each stressed the need for grass-roots efforts in support of religious liberty for all.

"Government can be very, very helpful. But ultimately it has to be people who are committed to this for the duration," Seiple said. "Never expect more from the government than the government is prepared to do."

Thames noted the CIRF exists to inform Congress and the executive branch on issues of religious freedom throughout the world. Since the body's staff and budget are limited, he said they were "delighted to partner with NGOs and religious organizations" in monitoring the situation on the ground overseas.

"Religious freedom stands atop other human rights," Thames said. "It really is the 'canary in the coal mine.'"

And while different organizations can and do unite on common issues, having "space" for differences of opinion is also vital, Foltin said.

"To get your voice heard, you have to leverage your presence by working in coalition," Foltin explained. "What's important is that there's a relationship that allows us to work together," he added, noting that the AJC's constituency, by and large, has a different view of "establishment" issues -- those where government can be involved in religious activity -- than some groups it partners with on freedom of religious expression matters.

On the expression side, Foltin said, the "principle issue [in the United States today] is the Workplace Religious Freedom Act -- a bill that would protect the ability of people of faith to observe their religion. The [current non-discrimination] law is not as effective as it ought to be. One of these days we'll see that enacted as well, God willing."

And whether the issue is local or global, Seiple added, achieving results can often take far longer than expected. He noted that it was only after decades of work in Laos and Vietnam that NGOs began to see positive results. And in some countries, where an American diplomat may have difficulty in presenting a wide range of issues, the NGO that focuses on global engagement in the religious freedom sphere can often be more warmly received.
"Then you will know you have arrived, when you exchange pictures of your grandchildren with a hostile enemy," Seiple said.

All three also stressed the need for NGOs and religious liberty advocates to get young people involved. Thames reaches out via the Twitter messaging service; Seiple commended youth involvement; and Foltin observed that it’s also necessary to let young people express differing opinions as part of the engagement process.
Do not give a blank check to abusive regimes, says US official at 7th World Congress

When Knox Thames, director of Policy and Research for the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, stood to address World Congress attendees this morning, he held in his hand a piece of rubble from a Seventh-day Adventist church building in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, demolished some years ago by government authorities.

In his presentation, Knox acknowledged the current global crisis in religious freedom—the results of which he has seen first-hand through his visits to many different countries representing the US Department of State and through his liaison work with the United Nations and the OSCE.

Yet, at the same time, he sounded a note of optimism, saying, "I'm not without hope that religious liberty advocates can make a real difference."

Knox illustrated the power of advocacy by presenting a case study of the progressive lifting of some religious restrictions in the central Asian country of Turkmenistan over the past decade. With persistent advocacy by individuals and organizations, Knox said that a number of governments, including the United States, were moved to exert diplomatic pressure on Turkmenistan to ease restrictions. It's this extended awareness-raising and diplomatic effort that Knox credits with the eventual easing of registration requirements for minority faith groups in Turkmenistan.

"I have seen that the efforts of individuals, faith groups and non-governmental organizations can save lives, change laws, and expand religious freedom," said Knox. He warned that ongoing advocacy is difficult and results are never assured. He advised advocates to act with discernment and persistence, and to reject the temptation to exaggerate their cause or to speak without knowing all the facts.

"More people of goodwill are needed in struggle for freedom," he said, "But come prepared. We need to do more than just say 'Please.'"
“Religious freedom is the most personal of our human rights.” This was a statement made early on in Attorney Knox Thames’ presentation this morning—the first presentation made during Day Two of the IRLA World Congress—and it has lingered with me throughout the remainder of the day.

Knox serves as the Director of Policy and Research at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent U.S. government entity created by Congress to monitor religious freedom worldwide and make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and the Congress. His talk this morning put a much-needed face—albeit a demolished one—on the cause of religious discrimination: a Seventh-day Adventist Church in Turkmenistan which was razed in 1989 “for the betterment of the community” under the religiously hostile regime of Sparmut Niyazov.

Often times, when policy experts and academics convene to parse a theme or concept, the “personal” component of the topic is regrettably neglected. As neither an expert nor an academic, but merely a layperson passionate about religious liberty, I appreciated the walk through the Turkmenistan case study. It helped me visualize not only the blatant discrimination against the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but also illuminated the practical application of the US government’s foreign policy in matters of religious freedom.

Thames concluded his remarks by appealing to the audience that the reason why we continue to fight for religious freedom is because it matters to those who are “rotting in a God-forsaken jail cell” because of their conscientious objection to military service. It matters to those whose house of worship has been destroyed. It matters to those whose holy day of worship is sacred. It matters to those who wish to keep their religious affiliation or share their faith with others. In other words, it matters to those whose religion, faith, or belief system—whichever term you prefer—is their priority, their focus, quite simply, their life.

And so, I’ve decided to use Knox’s statement this morning as a jumping off point for a bit of self-reflection and motivation. If indeed my faith is the most precious aspect of my life; if for me service to God takes precedence over service to man (including my own self-interest!); and as a Christian, if my relationship with Jesus Christ is second to none other; then, yes, religious freedom will naturally be the most personal of human rights. Both my own religious freedom and that of others.

So is it truly? Does religious freedom resonate more deeply and touch me most closely? Today—the second day of the International Religious Liberty Association’s 7th World Congress—it absolutely does.
There are nearly 900 delegates at the 7th IRLA World Congress in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic.