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Govt efforts appreciable for interfaith harmony

By Mobarik A. Virk

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Islamabad : "It was indeed an appreciable step by the Pakistan government which reacted swiftly once the Chief Justice took notice of desecration and demolition of a Hindu temple in Rahimyar Khan and repaired and handed it over to the local Hindu community after restoration," said Sajid Ishaq, Chairman Pakistan Interfaith League (PIL).

He said that it was a good step that the damaged Hindu temple was repaired, restored and returned to the Hindu community on the 'International Minorities Day', a step which certainly has improved image of Pakistan at international level.

"But, even more important is to take meaningful steps to prevent such incidents in future in the first place. To achieve this objective, to promote interfaith harmony and peaceful co-existence we need to educate all to respect each religion and their followers without any discrimination," Sajid Ishaq said.

"I believe being a Muslim majority nation, it is even a bigger responsibility of our Muslim brethren in general and Muslim religious scholars and leaders in particular to make people understand that they should make the people of other faiths around them feel comfortable. This could be done only by educating people, something which only religious scholars and leadership can do," he added.

He said that indeed this one act, done on the orders of the Supreme Court of Pakistan Chief Justice and on the directions of the country's Prime Minister has earned a lot of respect for the country. However, he added, why attention is not being paid to the root cause of such incident, which is religious intolerance, be it sectarian or interfaith?

He pointed out that there are laws for the protection of minority communities and their rights are enshrined in country's Constitution. Yet such unfortunate incidents targeting members of non-Muslim communities and their worship places continue to occur. These incidents dwindle. Sometimes the frequency and intensity is more and some time it is less. But, he asked, why does these not stop altogether?

"In my opinion, one thing is that these laws carved out to provide protection to the lives, properties and right to worship are inadequate and need a thorough review with consultation with all the stake holders.

Secondly, these laws, which exist, are not being implemented as those should be and the lacunas in those are widely exploited to give benefit of doubt to the aggressors. The most vivid example of this is the forced conversions in the name of marriage of young non-Muslim girls. This has clearly created a sense of helplessness and insecurity amongst the members of the non-Muslim minority communities in the country," Sajid Ishaq said.

While appreciating the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and the Prime Minister he urged them not to stop at this point and taking advantage of the situation to bring meaningful change in society with regard to this particularly sensitive issue.

"They have kicked the ball and set it rolling. Now they need to keep it moving in the right direction, which should eventually bring about achieving the objective of creating an environment of interfaith co-existence and harmony," Sajid Ishaq said.

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