

Bell: Religious freedom comes home

By Times Dispatch Staff

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Sunday, Jan. 16, was Religious Freedom Day. In Doug Bandow's excellent Op/Ed column that day, The Times-Dispatch excerpted findings of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2010 Annual Report concerning the misdeeds of countries that oppress believers. In its editorial the previous day, the T-D eloquently laid out the reasons religious freedom should be of paramount importance to us all, citing the First Freedom Center's own report on Minority Communities at Risk. President Barack Obama, from the White House, renewed the annual Presidential Declaration affirming support at the highest level of our nation for the liberties enshrined in the 1786 Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.

This salutary attention to the fundamental human rights our center works to advance came at a time when for me, both personally and professionally, the issue of standing firm for the sanctity of the individual human conscience has been "coming home." The First Freedom Center recently hosted its annual awards dinner and had the privilege not only of honoring Asma Jahangir, a towering figure in the human-rights world, but also of hosting her accomplished daughter Sulema Jahangir, herself a brave and articulate human-rights advocate.

Asma Jahangir, who served for years as the U.N.'s special rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief, could not leave an increasingly chaotic Pakistan. I therefore spent several days in Sulema's company, not only as I showed her my home city of Richmond, but also as I accompanied her to Washington. There, she briefed congressional personnel about the misuse in her country of a blasphemy law for the arbitrary persecution both of religious minorities and of Muslims. She described the hatred and the climate of fear that have grown up in Pakistan in the wake of the Jan. 4 assassination by a member of his own bodyguard of Punjab state Gov. Salmaan Taseer for suggesting that the law be amended.

During our many conversations, we spoke about things that Americans and their government can do to strengthen respect for universal rights. "You are so very fortunate," Sulema reminded me, "to have so many and such secure rights." Pakistanis, she observed, filled with frustrations and fears, are often unsure of American attitudes. "But we depend so much upon you." From our conversations also, I learned at what personal risk mother and daughter conduct their advocacy of religious rights in a country that murders its governors. Asma Jahangir regularly receives death threats. Sulema has already once been abducted.

As we prepared for Jahangir's visit, my wife and I learned that our son, a naval aviation officer currently flying with allied forces over Afghanistan — where freedom of conscience is also at grave peril — will be home soon all too briefly before he undertakes

a year's ground duty in Kabul. Christopher and I often discuss how my years in the Foreign Service, his years in the Navy, and the work of public-policy organizations like the First Freedom Center relate. One thing he knows from the long periods he spent with us during the "bad old days," assigned behind what we still called the Iron Curtain: People in authoritarian countries get punished for expressing and acting on their beliefs. For as much as he loves flying, his decision — like Sulema's — to place himself at risk arises from real knowledge of what happens when rights are denied. So, in a very resounding way, it was a week during which it came home to me that there is a cost for maintaining and extending human rights.

During the same week, there was much discussion about the comparisons which can or cannot be drawn between the recent shooting rampage in Arizona and extremist violence like that which snuffed out the life of Taseer. Some Americans see extremism or its encouragement in the background of the Tucson shootings. Others take strong offense at the imputation to American political debate of causality.

To me, what comes home is something quite different. Sulema Jahangir reported that not a single Pakistani clergyman was willing to face the danger of offering a eulogy at Taseer's funeral. Thousands of Pakistanis, quite to the contrary, praised his slayer. No prosecutor has been willing to bring action against the perpetrator. Pakistan's government, which had earlier declared its interest in reforming the Blasphemy Law, now refuses to touch it. Following the senseless Arizona shootings, the tragic loss of life they occasioned, and the hospitalization of Congresswoman Giffords, thousands of Americans turned out to mourn, to bewail and to condemn — not a single person to condone. President Obama spoke eloquently on behalf of Americans united in their opposition to violent injustice, not least because Jared Lee Loughner may have acted at least in part out of hateful anti-Semitism.

Whether issues of freedom of conscience and religion were or were not involved in what happened in Arizona, the contrast in public reactions makes clear the importance and the advantage of a public culture of rights, of respect for them, and of determination to advance them. I put Sulema Jahangir on a plane, fearful for her safety, but proud that we had recognized her and her mother while she was among us. My wife and I will meet our son at the same airport, proud that he knows why rights are worth taking risks for — and glad that the vast majority of our fellow citizens still respect both human dignity and its defense.

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