

Asia Watch raps Pakistan for "blasphemy laws"

ISLAMABAD, Sept 19: Religious minorities in Pakistan are harassed and persecuted under "blasphemy laws" that ban remarks against Islam, a human rights group charged Sunday, reports AP.

Asia Watch, based in New York, cited 10 cases in 1992 in which people were charged with making derogatory comments against Islam. In separate cases, a Muslim and a Catholic were sentenced to death. Both men have appealed.

The 22-page report did not cite any human rights violations under the current caretaker government of Prime Minister Moeen Qureshi, which was appointed in July and plans to step down after elections October 6.

The document also failed to mention recent improvements

in human rights in Pakistan. Democracy and many civil rights were restored following the 1988 death of military强人 General Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, who ruled for 11 years.

Benazir Bhutto, who served as Prime Minister from 1988 to 1990, is credited with most of the reforms, which included the release of political prisoners who were jailed under Zia.

Asia Watch said more than 100 people have been charged with blasphemy offenses since 1987, most of them from the Ahmadi religious sect, which follows most, but not all, Muslim customs.

Pakistan's government declared in 1974 that the Ahmadis were "non-Muslims" and they have been persecuted regularly, Asia Watch said.

PLO, Hamas officials likely to meet in Yemen soon

LONDON, Sept 19: Officials from the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the Palestinian Islamic Movement Hamas are likely to meet soon in Yemen, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat disclosed in an interview appearing here today, reports AFP.

"Our executive committee appealed for reconciliation," Arafat told The Observer newspaper.

"Hamas replied they are ready to attend a meeting very soon in Yemen."

Hamas has condemned and rejected a PLO decision to recognize Israel's right to exist and to sign a declaration of principles with Israel on limited self-rule for Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Hassan Asfour, one of the three Palestine Liberation Organisation members who negotiated the agreement in secret.

Reuter from Tunis adds:

PLO-Israeli peace agreement

said on Saturday it was too

early for Arab states to open

normal relations with Israel.

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three Palestine Liberation

Organisation members who ne-

gotiated the agreement in secret.

The PLO leader meanwhile

arrived Saturday in Cairo to at-

tend a meeting of Arab League

foreign ministers, where he was

expected to defend the Israeli-

PLO deal in the face of objec-

tions from hardline Arab states

such as Iraq and Libya.

"Normalisation is a big price,

too big to be the price for this

agreement, especially when it is

still a piece of paper" he told

Reuters in an interview.

"It must be linked with

Israel's withdrawal from the oc-

cupied territories and recogni-

tion of the Palestinian people's

political and legal rights," he ad-

ded.

"This does not mean hostility

(towards normalisation) but the

timing of it requires coordina-

tion and a commitment from

Israel to put the agreement into

effect," he said.

Israel had hoped the agree-

ment would be enough to per-

suade some Arab states to es-

teblish diplomatic relations and

end their economic boycott of

Israel.

The United States, which has

long campaigned for an end

to the boycott, takes a similar

view.

But the official Syrian media

have since made oblique criti-

cisms of the agreement and

have given publicity to Palesti-

nian radicals opposed to

Arafat.

"We consider the Syrian

position is that which is has ex-

pressed officially," Asfour said.

"The rest is speculation."

"I don't think it's in Syria's

interest to wreck the agreement,

perhaps the opposite is the

case. Supporting the agreement

could help Syria reach an

agreement with Israel on the

Golan Heights," he added.



Palestine Liberation Organization President, Yasser Arafat (L) accompanied by the General Secretary of Arab League Esamat Abdelmagid (R) as they arrive at the opening of the 100th Arab Foreign Ministers meeting in Cairo Sept 19.

— AFP photo

in Norway, said Arab states

should wait until Israel pulls its forces out of the West Bank and Gaza.

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