August 17, 2016

His Excellency Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif  
Prime Minister  
Islamic Republic of Pakistan

RE: Assassination of Bilal Kasi and Attacks on Lawyers

Dear Prime Minister:

The American Bar Association (ABA) is deeply concerned about the recent assassination of Mr. Bilal Kasi, President of the Baluchistan Bar Association, who was shot dead on August 8, 2016, and the subsequent suicide attack at a hospital in the southwestern city of Quetta which killed at least 70 people – mostly lawyers - who had gathered there in response to the murder of Mr. Kasi. As an independent, voluntary, non-governmental organization of lawyers and judges with nearly 400,000 members worldwide, the ABA regards human rights and the rule of law as cornerstones of a free and fair society and is committed to strengthening them in the United States and abroad. The foundation of law and justice in Quetta and the entire province are imperiled by the decimation of senior practicing lawyers and barristers. We express outrage at these brutal acts and send our condolences to those who have lost family, friends, counsel, and colleagues.

Victims of the attack in Quetta include: Arbab Gulzareen, a key human rights defender involved in a program of the ABA Rule of Law Initiative that promoted international human rights law in the national security arena. Mr. Gulzareen was a part of the Pakistani Lawyers’ Working Group for Human Rights and International Law, originally formed during a closed door, three-day workshop in Kathmandu, Nepal in June 2013. The Working Group grew into the Network for International Law and Human Rights, a national network of Pakistani lawyers and other individuals working toward the promotion and development of international human rights law inside Pakistan.

The ABA calls upon the government of Pakistan, the government of the province of Balochistan, and local, provincial and federal law enforcement agencies to investigate this attack with due care and appropriate resources in order to bring those responsible to justice under the law. We call upon the Pakistani government, with law enforcement, to develop a comprehensive program to protect the lives of members of the legal profession and judiciary from further attacks. While
all members of Pakistani society combat the menace of terrorism, members of the legal profession have been specifically targeted. Lawyers should not operate in fear of persecution or reprisal when they uphold the very ideals upon which justice and the security of life, liberty and freedom depend.

The state’s failure to protect lawyers as they engage in the practice of law seriously undermines the rule of law in Pakistan. Lawyers must be able to act in their professional capacity as legal counselors and advocates, even in “sensitive” cases. Legal and justice systems operating under the rule of law require a strong legal profession able to engage in robust representation of their clients and to advocate for fair application of the law.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers has recommended that “[a]nyy acts of harassment, threats or physical assaults, including killings of judges, prosecutors, lawyers, other judicial officers and legal professionals should be promptly investigated and perpetrators sanctioned,”. While we commend ongoing efforts to build a more democratic Pakistan, we must emphasize that attacks on lawyers simply for engaging in the practice of law protected under international law and the Pakistani constitution seriously undermine the rule of law.

We express our support for and solidarity with the lawyers and judges of Pakistan in their pursuit of upholding the rule of law. The ABA stands beside them in this time of loss.

Sincerely,

Linda A. Klein

cc: Mr. John Kerry, U.S. Secretary of State
    Mr. Richard Olson, U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan
    Mr. Jalil Abbas Jilani, Pakistan Ambassador to the U.S.
    Mr. Salman Aslan Butt, Attorney General for Pakistan
    Mr. Muhammad Ramzan Chaudhry, Vice Chairman of the Pakistan Bar Council
    Mr. Mian Mohammad Shahbaz Sharif, Chief Minister Punjab
    Mr. Justice Tassaduq Hussain Jillani, Chief Justice of Pakistan