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## US Lawmakers Eye Potential Sanctions on Pakistan Over Rights Abuses

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Members of the US Congress have raised serious concerns over Pakistan’s record on religious freedom and human rights, signalling that sanctions could be considered if violations persist. The warning came during a bipartisan hearing held by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in Washington, spotlighting mounting repression in Pakistan.

The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC) hearing focused on growing restrictions on civil liberties, crackdowns on minority communities, and the weaponisation of blasphemy laws to suppress dissent. Republican Congressman Christopher H. Smith, co-chair of the commission, said the US has failed to take meaningful action on repeated abuses, regardless of which administration is in power.

“One of the biggest disappointments has been the absence of sanctions,” said Rep. Chris Smith during the hearing. “This isn’t about political partisanship. This is about basic human dignity and the rule of law.”

Congressman James McGovern, a Democrat and fellow co-chair of the TLHRC, echoed the concerns. He emphasised that international scrutiny plays a vital role in holding countries like Pakistan accountable for human rights abuses. “They need to know that people are watching. They need to know we don’t like what we are hearing,” McGovern told the panel.

Key human rights voices testified before the commission, including Ben Linden from Amnesty International and international human rights lawyer Jared Genser of Perseus Strategies. Their testimonies highlighted severe and worsening human rights conditions in Pakistan.

. Linden highlighted serious abuses in Balochistan, where enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and military crackdowns on activists have intensified. He also pointed to the increasing weaponisation of Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, which are often exploited to target religious minorities and political opponents. “These vaguely worded laws are being used by dominant religious groups to target minorities, and those accused often have little chance to defend themselves,” said Linden.

Jared Genser argued that while the situation is dire, the U.S. should not sever ties with Pakistan but instead use diplomatic leverage to press for reforms. “We don’t act that way with any regime. We have to engage,” Genser explained. He added that clear messaging from Washington is essential. “President Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio must communicate that while the US values its relationship with Pakistan, progress is needed. That includes the release of political prisoners like former Prime Minister Imran Khan.”

The discussion signals a potential shift in how U.S. lawmakers approach deteriorating human rights conditions in countries considered strategic allies. Though Pakistan remains

important in regional security calculations, many lawmakers appear unwilling to overlook human rights violations in the name of diplomacy.

The hearing comes amid broader concern in Washington over democratic backsliding in Pakistan. Civil society groups have reported escalating harassment of journalists, enforced disappearances, and politically motivated judicial actions targeting opposition figures.

Lawmakers are considering responses such as targeted sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act, increasing pressure on Pakistan's government to implement reforms or face punitive measures. While no formal policy changes have been announced, the bipartisan tone of the hearing suggests growing momentum for a tougher U.S. stance on Pakistan's human rights record.

The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, named after the late Congressman and Holocaust survivor, promotes international human rights through hearings, legislative recommendations, and advocacy.