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ASIA/MALAYSIA - Bishops' Conference calls for the need to “defuse the conflict that fundamentalist groups are trying to ignite in the nation”

Johor (Agenzia Fides) – The Malaysian Church is "concerned and did not expect that the question of the use of the word 'Allah,' would be followed by a reaction of this kind, with attacks against churches and Christian buildings. There is an urgent need to work for dialogue and social harmony, to defuse the conflict that fundamentalist groups are trying to ignite in the nation." According to information released, this is what the Bishops' Conference of Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei said during their meeting, which opened today in Johor, on the peninsula of Malacca (in southern Malaysia), and which is scheduled to last until January 15.
According to information sent to Agenzia Fides, the Assembly of Bishops had already been scheduled for some time and was to address pastoral issues. The events precipitated in Malaysia have imposed a change of agenda and Prelates discussed their impact and the countermeasures to be taken in this situation, which is described as "worrisome and delicate."
As Fides has learned, during the debate on the first day the Bishops stressed that "meetings with civil authorities and dialogue with Muslim leaders are ongoing and will continue in the coming days. We must act in harmony and seek the necessary cooperation of the government and the high religious authorities in order to restore a peaceful environment to Malaysian society.” Another reason is because these episodes are "smearing" the reputation of Malaysian Islam, known for its moderation and peaceful coexistence with other religions. So much so that groups of moderate Muslims have taken turns guarding churches to avoid further acts of violence.
Archbishop Salvatore Pennacchio, Apostolic Delegate to Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, has expressed the solidarity and closeness of the Holy See to the Malaysian Church, stressing the need to "work for dialogue and peace in the country," in collaboration with the civil authorities.
The President of the Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Murphy Pakiam of Kuala Lumpur, told Fides (see Fides 9/1/2010) that new attacks were feared on Sunday, when churches would be filled with faithful. His fears proved well founded, as new attacks have occurred in other cities and other states of the Malaysian nation, far from the capital Kuala Lumpur, which was the site of the first four attacks. Yesterday - Sunday, January 10 – two churches were attacked, one Catholic and one Anglican, in Taiping in the State of Perak. In addition, in Malaysian Borneo, a Baptist church in Malacca has been soiled with black paint and a Catholic Church in Miri was damaged by stones being throwed at it. Today, another evangelical church in Malaysian Borneo has been the subject of an attack, the ninth in this series of attacks.
It is this wanton violence which, although manifest in acts that did not cause casualties, has alarmed the bishops. Christians, they said, "will work and will do everything possible to keep calm, not retaliate, and pray to avoid a dangerous escalation of the violence." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 11/01/2010)

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