



ASIA/PAKISTAN - Sinister child trafficking behind the sad case of Shazia

Lahore (Fides Service) – There is a sinister twist of sale, trafficking, and slavery of children surrounding the case of Shazia, the Catholic girl who was raped and killed by a Muslim lawyer in Lahore, where she served as his maid (see Fides 25/1/2010). As Fides learns from Catholic sources in Pakistan, the sad case of Shazia is showing investigators the ramifications and dynamics that lead back to a real organized crime, based on the trafficking of children. Children are taken from their poor families, often Christian, with the illusion that they will find dignified work among middle-class families. They are then sold to these families, becoming "little slaves" at the mercy of their employers, losing their freedom, and living practically under arrest.

This is what happened to little Shazia Masih, Fides sources say. Born in 1997 into a Catholic family in the district of Tehsil Shahkot (near Lahore), Shazia soon lost her father and her mother, Nasreen Bibi, married her current husband, Bashir Masih. The family lives a life of hardship, struggling to survive and find a better future.

This is when a man named Amanat Masih, who proves to be a mediator and trafficker of children, shows up at their house. He parades false promises of a better life for Shazia, boasting of contacts with wealthy families in Lahore.

Shazia's mother is deceived and lets go of her daughter, whom Amanat sells to lawyer Naeem Choudry, assuring him "a little slave-maid."

Amanat knows the smart way to choose his victims: families are poor and illiterate, helpless, Christian and preferably with several children. Today he is in prison: he was arrested January 23 for violence and child trafficking and the Lahore police have recovered at least three other children who had ended up in the network of smugglers.

Before Christmas, the parents of Shazia went to inquire after her, but they were not even received at Choudry's home. Shazia's parents prayed and waited until January 21, when Naeem himself handed them the lifeless body of Shazia, saying that she "had fallen down stairs" and offering 20,000 rupees for the funeral and for their silence.

"The issue is particularly thorny because it surrounds a man of law, a person who should pursue justice, and instead has become complicit in criminal actions," note sources of Fides in Pakistan.

Many children are sold as slaves for work or prostitution in Pakistan. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), about 12 million Pakistani children are forced into child labor, often in conditions of real slavery, especially in Punjab and the Northwest Frontier Province. This phenomenon, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) says, is unfortunately on the rise. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 16/2/2010)