



## **ASIA/INDIA - Blasphemous image of Christ, clashes, two churches destroyed, curfew established in Punjab**

Jalandhar (Agenzia Fides) – There has been increased protest in response to a blasphemous picture of Christ, published in a textbook published in New Delhi and used in schools in India. The text, published by Skyline Publications, shows an image of Christ with a cigarette in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other, saying that it is an "idol."

Local sources of Fides report that the spread of the blasphemous portrait, also published by some media sources, has generated the protest of the Christian communities in several states.

In the state of Punjab (northwest India), the blasphemous portrait was exhibited publicly in the streets of the city of Jalandhar. Local Christians protested peacefully with civil authorities, demanding the removal of the image. In the town of Batala (District Gurdaspur), the situation degenerated as some young Christians sought to remove the posters in a Hindu-dominated marketplace, while other young Hindu extremists tried to stop them. This led to a brawl and violence has spread to the entire city, as leaders of the extremist movements such as "Bajrang Dal" and "Shiv Sena" took to the streets armed and incited the people to violence against the Christians. Two Protestant churches (belonging to the Church of North India and the Salvation Army Church) have been attacked, burned and razed. Even the pastors were assaulted and beaten and their houses looted.

Some Christians accused of being involved in the violence have been arrested by police, while no Hindu extremist was arrested. Local authorities have declared a curfew, but the situation remains very tense, note sources of Fides. The case of the blasphemous portrait reached the public spotlight when in the state of Meghalaya (Northeast India) Catholic nuns of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, which runs the school of St. Joseph in the city of Shillong, noticed the image in a children's textbook. The Sisters have asked people to return the text and sent a letter to the authorities expressing their indignation and bitterness about the total lack of respect for Christian religious symbols. The state government has ordered the withdrawal of the book from circulation. Christian churches in India are taking action: "We asked all Catholic schools in India to withdraw the text and to boycott all the books of Skyline Publications. That image is unacceptable and goes against every principle of respect and dialogue," Fides was told by Fr. Babu Joseph, spokesman of the Bishops' Conference of India. There is also a consideration of carrying out some legal action, at an ecumenical level, against the publisher. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 22/02/2009)