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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Violence against Christians in Karachi, working to return to calm

Karachi (Agenzia Fides) – There is calm on the streets, but tension remains high in the city of Karachi in southern Pakistan, where Sunday, February 21 a group of 150 Muslims attacked Christian churches, shops, and homes in the area of Pahar Ganj, a pre-dominantly Christian neighborhood in the city. This is what local sources of Fides have explained, noting that the local religious leaders have been working to organize various initiatives to bring peace and calm back to the population, especially in terms of Muslim-Christian relations.
"The people were very frightened, but now all is calm. Certainly, in the city the climate is rather tense, especially the conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims that has reached the point of extreme violence. Sometimes, religious minorities like Christians are victims of this simmering tension, which is at the point of explosion for petty reasons. After the riots on Sunday, police took control of the situation and now patrol the streets of the neighborhood. Even the churches are protected by guards" Fides was told by Fr. Edward Joseph, Pastor of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Karachi.
"We hope there is no further violence. All priests of the diocese are gathered in a Lenten retreat with the Archbishop Evarist Pinto, praying for peace and harmony," notes the priest.
The violence broke out on February 21. The riot started over a simple dispute between a Muslim fruit merchant and a young Christian customer. The simple quarrel degenerated into widespread violence when the merchant rallied other Muslims telling them to "teach the Christians a lesson." The attackers fired on the houses and beat up Christians on the streets, vandalizing shops and burning cars, as well as damaging two Protestant churches (St. Mary Church of Pakistan and the Interdenominational Calvary Church). Some Catholic institutions, such as St. Jude's School, have closed their doors for fear of attacks.
Christian and Muslim religious leaders in Karachi are working for dialogue, to avoid misunderstandings, misconceptions, and new episodes of violence. Christians and Muslims must not allow petty disputes that may occur in everyday life to degenerate into “religious conflict.” (PA) (Agenzia Fides 24/2/2010)

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