



ASIA/PAKISTAN - "Hotline" for religious minorities with President Zardari: Christians report two serious cases of violence

Islamabad (Agenzia Fides) – The President of Pakistan, Ali Zardari, said he would set up a "hotline" to report directly to its officers the most serious cases of violence against religious minorities in Pakistan. Zardari, in agreement with the Minister for Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, has ordered to set up a phone line at the Ministry, which is in close contact with his office to intervene in emergencies by taking immediate action in cases of oppression of religious minorities. The President also called for the establishment of a national interreligious commission, which can communicate with the government to tackle the most pressing issues.

The Christian community in Pakistan has welcomed this initiative, "hoping it will serve to give a jolt to the public and the police for effective protection of religious minorities in the country," says a source of Fides in the Catholic community in Pakistan.

Particularly in these days, Christians have told the Government of two serious acts of violence against believers: that of young Kiran George, a girl from Sheikhpura (Lahore), and Arshed Masih, a husband and father from Shamsabad (Rawalpindi). Both were burned alive for refusing to convert to Islam.

Fides local sources are clear on the story of Kiran George, which some have tried to pollute with false accusations. The girl died on March 10 from burns all over her body, after Ahmad Raza, a Muslim police officer, poured gasoline on her and lit her on fire. The girl had been enslaved by a woman, Sama, a "dealer" of youth sold as prostitutes or slaves to wealthy Muslim families. Once she convinced Kiran's mother (with false promises and illusions) to take her, Kiran was forced to file a complaint against her own parents (for non-existent violence), threatening that otherwise they would be killed. She was then sold to Muslim Ahmad Raza, requiring her conversion to Islam and forced marriage.

Kiran, who was pregnant and in a state of extreme despair, had the courage to tell the police of her story, but the police, supporting Raza, did not register any complaint. When Raza heard of the event, he did not hesitate to kill her himself, burning her alive. "It's a case of extreme violence, a double murder, which remains unpunished," note sources of Fides in Pakistan.

Another recent case, reported Fides, is that of Arshed Masih, husband and father of three in Rawalpindi. Masih was working as a driver for a wealthy Muslim who, after 5 years, asked him to convert to Islam under threats. After Masih expressed his intention to leave that job (given the undue pressures), Mohammad Sultan, the employer, reported a theft at his home, accusing Masih and promising to invalidate the complaint if he converted. Upon his refusal, on March 19, Masih was attacked and burned alive and his wife Mary was raped. Masih is now in a hospital in Rawalpindi fighting for his life. Christians call for the urgent intervention of the government to restore law and justice. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 22/3/2010)