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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Bishops' Conference President tells Fides: action, not words, from the government in defending Pakistani Christians

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) – "We condemn the recent incidents and violence against Christians. We ask the government for justice and legality, so that such acts do not go unpunished. We demand that the rights of Christians are respected, as they should be for all other citizens." This is what Archbishop Lawrence Saldanha of Lahore, President of the Pakistani Bishops' Conference, told Fides in commenting on the latest cases of Christians being burned alive for refusing to convert to Islam (see Fides 22/3/2010).
Arshed Masih, a Christian of Rawalpindi was burnt alive by his employer and died last night in Holy Family Hospital in Rawalpindi, where he was hospitalized. Fides sources present at the site tell of "the immense grief of the family, a tragic and heartbreaking scene, especially for the two sons of Arshed Masih. While the date of the funeral is determined, "there are fears that political authorities will prevent the police investigation and the case will be thrown out", noted the sources of Fides.
Concerned, the President of the Bishops' Conference tells Fides: "The political authorities, the media of Pakistan, the international community, civil society: all are called to do more to create awareness on the situation of suffering and insecurity of Christians and religious minorities, who should be protected in their dignity and fundamental human rights."
He continues: "We hope and call for greater security in view of the Holy Week celebrations. The Christian community wants to celebrate Easter in peace. Good Friday for Christians in Pakistan will be experienced with particular intensity and prayer, as the suffering of the present unites us in the Cross of Christ."
As for the announcement of the "direct hotline" number to the office of President Ali Zardari to report anti-Christian violence, Archbishop Saldanha said: "It would be an important step; we support it strongly. It is often difficult for Christians to have contact with the authorities and this could be an effective instrument. We insist and hope that this will soon be established, without delay of any kind."
Meanwhile, civil society is preparing demonstrations. Francis Mehboob Sada, Director of the Christian Study Center in Rawalpindi, ecumenical center for the promotion and protection of minorities in Pakistan, tells Fides: "We are bitter about the vulnerability of Christians who suffer under the regime of apartheid and the stigma of persecution. Arshed Masih's story is tragically true. The attitude of the police was appalling and shameful. With other NGOs, we will write to the President and the Prime Minister, asking for urgent action."
"The direct telephone line promised by Zardari must not remain a mere political announcement," continues Sada. "It must become a reality soon. Over the past two years, suffering for Christians has increased and from the politicians we have only received slogans and words. There are discriminatory laws in the country and serious incidents continue to occur, in which Christian citizens suffer violence in their everyday life."
The activist concludes: "Tomorrow will meet with a European Union delegation to ask to place pressure on the government to guarantee the basic rights of religious minorities in Pakistan." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 23/3/2010)

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