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# ASIA/PAKISTAN - Christians being “treated like animals”: international intervention urgently needed

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) – "In Pakistan, Christians suffer and see their lives in danger every day. In some areas, believers are treated like animals, in slavery or subjected to harassment, violence, and forced conversions." This has been affirmed, in an interview with Fides, by Fr. John Shakir Nadeem, Secretary of the Commission for Social Communications of the Pakistani Bishops' Conference, Director of Radio Veritas and the Television Center "Rabita Manzil" in Lahore. Fr. Nadeem explains that the context in which this suffering takes place is amidst a growing Islamization, the spread of fundamentalist groups, a framework that facilitates and legitimizes discrimination, and even persecution. There is a weak government, subject to blackmail by the extremists. This is why the priest insists that "the issue of human rights should enter the summit now underway in Washington between the U.S. and Pakistan."

Christians have been supported by the National Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, which has deplored the recent cases of "forced conversions to Islam" registering 50 cases of forced conversions to Islam in the country in the last 9 years.

"But, the official percentage is very low in comparison to the actual number of cases. Only very few cases of violence and intimidation are reported to the Commission, as oftentimes Christians are afraid. The Commission itself is also under pressure from extremists and thus has very little power," Fr. Nadeem tells Fides.

"There is a widespread phenomenon of kidnapping of Christian girls (as in the recent case of Shazia and Kiran George), with death threats to the poorest families. Their abduction is followed by conversion and forced marriage. It is a stigma that many NGOs denounce in the face of the indifference of the authorities," says the priest.

Fr. Nadeem told Fides that "the situation is certainly varies between urban and rural areas. Christians in the city - even in a general context of discrimination - live together in neighborhoods called 'colonies.' They have access to education, social services, to work. 30% of the Christian population can also make their way in society, even though here we are exposed to terrorist attacks against churches and Christian areas. In remote villages, rural areas, the situation is very different. Small Christian groups, often poor, marginalized, and illiterate, suffer the oppression of the Muslim majority and are under the rule of others who make their profit by bullying, to rape, slavery, murder." In such contexts, emphasizes Fr. Nadeem, "Christians are often subject to false accusations of blasphemy, to threats of conversion, violence against women, property and possessions."

The only solution to these problems, he adds, is "the real democratization of the country, which would guarantee human rights for all. This is why there is an urgent need for international pressure."

Also, the intervention of the Universal Church, "especially the Pope, encourages us, strengthens us in faith, comforts us," said Fr. Nadeem told Fides. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 24/3/2010)

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