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ASIA/PHILIPPINES - Bishop of Basilan issues appeal through Fides, says Cathedral is destroyed, people are terrified; asks for help from Universal Church

Isabela (Agenzia Fides) – "It is terrible. The bomb that exploded yesterday destroyed 70% of the Cathedral of Isabela and is now unsafe for use. Thank God, there were no casualties. Today we celebrated Mass at the Catechetical Center. The faithful are terrified. These terrorist acts seek to make life difficult for Christians and drive them out of Basilan." This is the dramatic testimony Fides has received from Bishop Martin Jumoad of the Prelature of Isabella, the capital of Basilan Island, in the southernmost part of the Philippines.
Yesterday, there were two terrorist attacks on the island: a bomb hit a government building and another hit the Catholic Cathedral in the city, leaving it severely damaged. Later, there were shots exchanged between terrorists and security forces, resulting in about 15 victims.
"It is the first time we are attacked so directly and with such force. In the past, I received several threatening letters and intimidation. There have been other smaller attacks, but now it is very different. This could be a tragedy. I seriously fear for my life and the lives of the faithful. However, today I went out to encourage the faithful. This is my mission," the Bishop told Fides.
"I have prepared a pastoral letter calling on Catholics to stay in Basilan, which is our home, and asking them to remain calm, not to react to violence, and to pray for peace. Today, a procession of people carrying candles as a sign of peace lit the city. Our hope must not die," he added, recalling that the population in Basilan is over 60%, compared to 40% Christian.
The bishop met with the civil authorities, "receiving support and solidarity." "One of the main problems - he said, telling Fides about the talks - is the proliferation of weapons in society. Throughout the southern Philippines, authorities are committed to fighting against this. Furthermore, they have assured us that the police will do their duty in tracking down the leaders, in combating terrorism, and in providing security to the people."
"We ask the Pope and the Universal Church and all aid agencies - concluded Bishop Jumoad – to help us in the prompt reconstruction of the Cathedral, a symbolic place for our community, where we give thanks to God; where we gather for praise, reflection, and charity.
The events that occurred yesterday, according to local sources of Fides, are signs of the "resurgence of terrorism in which several elements come together: the intention to sow instability on the eve of national elections (May 2010), intimidation towards Christians, and a feud between militias and Philippine Marines, present for years in the Southern Philippines."
The island of Basilan, along with Jolo and the Sulu Islands, is one of the bases of the terrorist group Abu Sayyaf, which has been rampant in many years, pursuing an ideology marked by radical nationalism and Islamic extremism. The Philippine Army stationed in the South has been working to stop the group (on the blacklist of terrorist groups on an international level), but has so far failed to eradicate it. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 14/4/2010)

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