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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Members of parliament threatened, held hostage by extremists: so blasphemy law stays in place

Hyderabad (Agenzia Fides) – “Pakistan's blasphemy law is a violation of fundamental human rights, it is unjust and it is continually misused: we firmly support national and international petitions for the law to be repealed. Members of parliament in Pakistan fear the reaction of extremists and for this reason, make no move to repeal the law ”: Bishop Max John Rodrigues, Catholic Bishop of Hyderabad told Fides. The Bishop was commenting an international campaign - in which in Europe, Aid to the Church in Need, has taken the lead,– to abolish the so-called blasphemy law.

Bishop Rodriguez recalled that the law is very often exploited and misused for local and personal disputes. But mainly, “ the accuser is not obliged to produce burden of proof and this opens the way for misuse. This situation can lead even to summary executions in the street on the part of ferocious crowds”.

The Bishop explains to Fides: “The law was introduced by the dictator Zia in 1986 and since then none of our governments, military or democratic, have succeeded in having it repealed. Nevertheless large sectors of society agree it should be abolished. Christians and other religious minorities have been struggling for years against the law, promoting a national and international campaign, and most Muslims in Pakistan are also against the law. The fact is that a handful of extremist Islamic groups, want to keep it and are ready to mobilise to this effect: when in the past, announcements or attempts to abolish the law were made, public protests halted the process immediately. Paradoxically in general public opinion agrees that the law should be repealed, but the opinion of a few minor extremist groups continues to prevail”.

“The body which has the power to act – the Bishop told Fides – is Parliament, where laws are passed or repealed. But today in parliament many members are afraid: they are intimidated, a possible target for extremists attacks. Our country is engaged in fighting terrorism, targeted murders, bomb explosions against our institutions and against the security forces. Those in power fear for their lives and this keeps the situation at a standstill”.

“However we intend to keep up the struggle –the Bishop concluded – in the hope that our country will free itself from the grip of terrorism and ideological and religious extremism”. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 17/6/2010)

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