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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Yet another Catholic accused of "blasphemy". Justice and Peace Commission says: "government is sleeping with regards to human rights"

Faisalabad (Agenzia Fides) – "Yet another violation of human rights and another sad example of Pakistan's 'blasphemy' law being misused to strike religious minority groups." Peter Jacob, Executive Secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Pakistan, said this to Fides with regard to the latest case of a Catholic being accused of blasphemy. Mr Rehmat Masih, age 73, resident in the archdiocese of Faisalabad, in the village of Jhandewall, has been reported by a local Muslim, Mr Sajid Hameed, for pronouncing blasphemous words against the Prophet Mohammed. Members of the local Catholic community, which took up the defense of the accused man, told Fides that the charge, clearly false, arose instead from interpersonal disputes over the ownership of land.
"We are confident that the accusations against Rehmat Masih will be lifted because he is innocent. We will stand by him. The Justice and Peace Commission will do everything in its power, at the legal level, and at the level of information and sensitisation, to defend the man publicly ", Peter Jacob told Fides.
The secretary added: "The government of Pakistan must wake up and shoulder its responsibilities, at both the legal and the political level, and explain why this law is allowed to harass and abuse innocent Pakistani citizens. Government is sleeping with regard to the question of human rights. What is lacking is real commitment in this field, and a transparent policy of respect for human rights. This happens because the government and parliament are hostages of extremist groups".
The international community is also called to take action: " Last May the European Parliament passed a very positive resolution on religious freedom and human rights in Pakistan: we hope to see it implemented very soon. We ask all international institutions to help us build a better Pakistan", Jacob concludes.
According to a recent Report issued by the Pakistan Bishops' Justice and Peace Commission on the Conditions of Religious Minorities in the country, cases of the blasphemy law being misused continue at a high rate all over the country. In 2009 no less than 112 cases were registered against 57 Ahmadi, 47 Muslims and 8 Christians Altogether, since law came into force in 1987, a total number of 1,032 people have been unjustly punished. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 23/6/2010)

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