



## **ASIA/INDIA - Priest threatened to death, Bishop warns: "Central India is in the hands of Hindu extremists"**

Indore (Agenzia Fides) – Fr. Anand Muttungal, a priest of the Diocese of Bhopal and spokesman for the Catholic Church in the state of Madhya Pradesh has received a death threat from Hindu extremists. "The situation is a cause for concern. The central part of India, from East to West, is in the hand of Hindu extremists groups who are committing violence, amidst a climate of impunity." These were the comments released to Agenzia Fides by Bishop Chacko Thottumarickal, SVD of Indore, in Madhya Pradesh, in launching an alert against the proliferation of Hindu extremist groups that promote a purist ideology that seeks to eliminate the pluralistic character of the Indian nation.

"In Central India, in states like Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, the Christian minority suffers due to the activity of Hindu extremist groups, also because on a political level, they have the support of the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which protects them and often guarantees impunity," remarked the Bishop. Fr. Anand, after yet another anonymous call with a death threat, filed a complaint with the police in Bhopal. They, in turn, assured him protection. The anonymous caller ordered him to abandon his social activities. The priest is also involved in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

How to react and to live as Christians in this sensitive context? The Bishop told Fides: "First of all we trust in God and his mercy. Then, we try to foster good relations with religious leaders, to unite Hindus and all the positive forces. We also have good relations with the media, to bring out the truth so we have the opportunity to let our voice be heard and present our version of the events. Along with all this, we work to promote awareness regarding rights, at all levels. Lastly, we maintain a good relationship with the civil and political authorities."

Some politicians have a "double face" and while shaking hands with Christian leaders, they protect the Hindu fundamentalists: "This does not impress us. We want to let them know that we do not consider them enemies. We want to put into practice the Gospel commandment to love enemies and live non-violence," the Bishop notes. Bishop Thottumarickal also recalls another sensitive issue: "In Madhya Pradesh, since 1967 an anti-conversion law called 'Freedom of Religion Bill' has been put in place, which prohibits conversions by deception, fraud, or by money. We also believe in conversion as movement of the heart, operated by the Spirit, otherwise it is not true conversion. But the law is used to limit the freedom of religion and the freedom to change religion."

In this context "evangelization is indeed a great challenge for these obvious obstacles and difficulties. For our part, however, we should awaken the missionary spirit among the faithful, through an on-going formation," said the Bishop. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 08/07/2010)