



ASIA/PAKISTAN - Mob attack on Christians: "sleepless night" for the Church in Faisalabad

Faisalabad (Agenzia Fides) – “Policemen patrol every street in Waris pura. After last night's attacks, the situation is tense and some panic stricken Christian families are barricaded in their homes. I and other Catholic priests spent the night on the streets trying to reassure people, calling on Christians not to react to violence with violence”: said Dominican Fr. Pascal Paulus, parish priest at Holy Rosary Church, in Waris pura, suburb of Faisalabad, after a sleepless night of emergency, fear of massacre, and the determination “to do everything possible to prevent bloodshed”. As the sun set – the priest told Fides– “a mob of about 2,000 armed Islamic militants launched an attack on the Christian district of Waris pura. The mob was out of control, shops and streets were devastated, there was shooting, looting and torching. Some Christians were hurt, but the outcome could have been much worse”. Yesterday was a tragic day for Christians in Faisalabad: two brothers Rashid and Sajid Emmanuel, born to Catholic parents, charged with blasphemy, arrested, tried and then finally acquitted, were barbarously murdered as they left Faisalabad law courts escorted by police officers as free innocent men. Armed men attacked the group killing the two brothers and also wounded one of the accompanying police officers. Bewildered Christians poured into the streets voicing grief and anger: “Emotional tension was high, there was some shouting, stone throwing against Muslim shops”, said Fr. Khalid Rashid Asi, vicar general of the diocese of Faisalabad.

Reaction from Muslim extremists was swift: a few local mosque preachers urged the Muslim mob to “fight the infidels”: some 2,000 militants raged through Waris pura all night long. Fr. Khalid continues: “We, four priests, went from door to door, begging Christians not to react, to stay calm, to avoid provoking a dangerous spiral of violence and revenge. We reminded them: we belong to Christ, we love peace, we forgive our enemies”. The police intervened to restore order and this morning Bishop Joseph Coutts of Faisalabad, presided the funeral of the two murdered brothers. Among those present, besides about 500 local Catholics, Fr. Emmanuel Mani, head of the Pakistani Bishops' Justice and Peace Commission. “Many of the faithful were still so frightened to leave their homes. Some leading Muslim citizens expressed solidarity with the Christians and condemned the violence”, Fr. Khalid told Fides. The brother's parents were Catholics and both had been baptised at the local Catholic church. Rashid recently had taken course with a Protestant denomination to prepare for preaching the Bible. “They were two innocent men. They are our martyrs. We ask only for respect, peace, equality and rights. As long as Pakistan has this blasphemy law, tragic episodes such as this will continue to happen”, concludes Fr. Khalid. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 20/7/2010)