



ASIA/INDIA - Bishop of Kashmir: "The community feels threatened, however political tensions have been brewing for some time"

Srinagar (Agenzia Fides) – "There are policemen everywhere, wherever there are churches and schools, to protect Christian sites. We are very sad for what has happened. We are very concerned. The Christian community, which has always been at peace, feels threatened. We are praying." This is what Fides was told by Bishop Celestine Elampassery of Jammu and Srinagar, following protests and attacks that were carried out against Christians yesterday, leading to 17 deaths along with Muslim protesters in Kashmir.

Today in Kashmir, tension remains high: the authorities have declared a curfew across the valley, but a group of extremists challenged the restrictive measures and took to the streets of Khanpora, in the District of Baramulla. "We have suffered no damages to Catholic churches; only Good Shepherd School in Pulwama was hit on the outer walls, by incendiary bombs, but the building is intact. We feel helpless and powerless in the face of this wave of senseless violence. We have nothing against the Muslims whom we respect as brothers. We have repeated this several times. However, a violent minority is fueling the tension," the bishop told Fides.

"It is worth mentioning that in Kashmir the political tension has been brewing for years and this has been its explosion. The region is plagued by separatist unrest and infested with armed militant groups. Even the Indian government, in this situation, is showing itself to be very cautious and prudent, aware of the difficult local situation...For our part, we hope to restore peace and reconciliation through dialogue and reaffirm the need for Christians to respect all other believers," he concluded.

Bishop Elampassery also mentioned to Fides that out of a total population of about 10,000,000 inhabitants in Kashmir, the Christian population numbers about 25,000, of which 15,000 are Catholics. The Church is very active in the social sphere, with a high-ranking school which is attended by Muslim students and respected by civil authorities and other religious communities. The Catholic community has been very active and has deployed its energy in the work of humanitarian assistance following the recent floods that have heavily affected the region of Ladakh, in the Leh area. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 14/09/2010)