



ASIA/PAKISTAN - Bishops: "The government needs to admit the discrimination and work against it"

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) - "The discrimination in aid distribution is still taking place. It's time the government officially admitted it, speaking out with clear words of condemnation and implementing a strategy to avoid it." These are the words of Peter Jacob, Secretary of the Commission for Justice and Peace of the Pakistani Bishops, in telling Fides of the plight of flood victims. The Commission is collecting news, testimonials, and details on aid management. Also, Archbishop Lawrence Saldhana, head of the Commission and President of the Bishops' Conference, told Fides: "We have received numerous reports and testimonies on the discrimination of minorities. Even the press is talking about it. It is something that worries us."

Despite recent denials by the Federal Minister for Religious Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, Jacob speaks of "undeniable facts: "We have eyewitnesses. The fact is that Pakistani society is divided at its core: vertically, between rich and poor; horizontally, between people of different religious communities. This division is also reflected in the formation of refugee camps and spontaneous settlements: the displaced come together for aid and the distribution is often selective."

The Secretary added: "We ask the government to fight with us against this ghettoization: This tragedy can be transformed, even for public institutions, into an opportunity to effectively work against the normally existing divisions in society...It must be said that the army, particularly in the first phase of relief - continued Jacob - has done a good job, helping everyone without discrimination. Today, the official aid only reaches the already organized refugee camps while thousands of refugees, especially the rural poor in remote areas do not receive any assistance." Among these are the poor Hindu and Christian minorities, who suffer doubly.

Then, there is the phenomenon of water diversion, carried out by some landowners to the detriment of poor rural villages - often belonging to religious minorities. After numerous cases reported by NGOs, Shahbaz Sharif, Chief Minister of Punjab, announced a set special Commission will conduct a thorough legal investigation, at least for the episodes that have occurred in the Province of Punjab. "The pressures of civil society have succeeded in seeking clarification and investigation on these serious institutional facts. We look forward to seeing the research and findings of the investigation," Peter Jacob told Fides, pointing out that the problem has been widely reported in the national press, generating strong disappointment among the public. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 09/15/2010)