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ASIA/MALAYSIA - Indigenous Christians denied right to build church

Kuala Lumpur (Agenzia Fides) - A small evangelical Christian community in the state of Kelantan (northeast of Peninsular Malaysia), composed of the indigenous group “Orang Asli,” has been denied the right to rebuild a church wiped out by floods. Since 2001, the community had a small bamboo church, later destroyed by floods. When the local community began work on a brick church by submitting a formal request to the local government, the Department of Orang Asli Affairs ordered an immediate stop of the building, without giving any reason. This is what Fides has learned from sources of the National Evangelical Christian Association in Malaysia. The case will be submitted to the recently created Interreligious Committee, established by the Malaysian government and called to investigate and solve problems dealing with religion and relations between communities in the country (see Fides 17/9/2010).
The story concerns Pos Pasike, a heavily forested area at 70km from Gua Musang. The area is inhabited by an indigenous community that converted to Christianity in 2001 and which now has 600 baptized. "Preventing the construction of the church, without due legal reasons, is discriminatory and goes against the fundamental right guaranteed in the Constitution, which allows everyone to profess and practice their religion freely, without undue outside interference," the National Christian Evangelical Association told Fides.
"Cases like this, which should be included in the right to worship and freedom of religion, are matters that will have to be reviewed by the new Committee for Understanding and Harmony Among Religions, launched by the Malaysian government,” Fides was told in an interview with Tan Kong Beng, Executive Secretary of the Malaysian Christian Federation, which brings together different Christian denominations in the nation.
"The Christian community enjoys freedom of religion guaranteed by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Malaysia, Article 11, but sometimes this freedom is limited by the restrictive interpretation given by government officials and the perception of the majority religious community in Malaysia, the Muslims. We believe that religious freedom must be guaranteed and promoted for all citizens, and that it is an essential principle," Tan Kong Beng told Fides.
The Christian Federation of Malaysia was formed in 1985 and includes the Catholic Church, the Protestant churches affiliated with the Council of Churches of Malaysia, and the National Christian Evangelical Association. It represents over 90% of Christians in Malaysia, which are 1.8% of the 28 million citizens. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 09/22/2010)

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