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ASIA/PAKISTAN - Christians protest chapel violently taken over by Muslims

Rawalpindi (Agenzia Fides) - A nonviolent protest and an outdoor Mass: this is how Christians in Pakistan intend to raise awareness in the national government and public opinion regarding the case of an illegal occupation of the Christian Chapel at Gordon College in Rawalpindi, located near the Presbyterian University in the same city.
On October 19, the Chapel was illegally occupied by force by a group of over 20 people who broke into the building and shut themselves inside: they are Muslim faithful who, with the support of some local politicians, are claiming ownership of the building, based on records that Christians consider artifacts. The group has occupied the chapel and, according to information sent to Fides, they intend to seize and sell the building to obtain several million rupees.
The Christian faithful of Rawalpindi, along with civil society associations and NGOs, tomorrow, October 23, will hold a march through the streets demanding justice. The march will also be attended by moderate Muslim organizations, who share the ideals of defending civil rights and religious freedom of Christians.
In addition, in a sign of support and solidarity, on Sunday, October 24, the Christian communities of all denominations will gather in the square in front of the building to celebrate the Sunday liturgy outdoors, asking God for “justice, peace, and freedom for Christians in Pakistan.”
The Presbyterian Church has tried to report the case to the police, but has not officially reported anything. In addition, the police did not act in any way to stop the occupants or evacuate the building. Christian lawyers have since brought the case to court, questioning the silence of the police and demanding justice for a violation of the rights of some citizens. An initial hearing on the case is scheduled for October 26.
The pastor of the Presbyterian Church, Iqbal Bhatti, has told the press: "The local parliamentarians of the Muslim League Nawaz Group of the District Administration do not want a church here. They intend to demolish it," while alarmed local Christians say that "in Punjab, since the Muslim League Nawaz has been in power, violence and persecution against Christians has increased significantly."
The chapel was closed for eight years for lack of a minister of religion and re-opened this year at Easter. Even then, it suffered an attack on Good Friday. The chapel building was leased to the Presbyterian Church by Evacuee Trust, a government fund that provides land and buildings to various religious communities. However, the leadership of the Fund - note sources of Fides - suffers political influence from men who want to attack religious minorities and trample their rights. In the past, Sikh and Hindu communities have also found themselves in the same conditions, having property and real estate, often shrines or places of worship regularly rented or purchased by the Fund, suddenly seized. (PA) (22/10/2010)

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