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ASIA/INDONESIA - Rise in attacks and violence against churches, Christians concerned

Jakarta (Agenzia Fides) - "The violence and attacks, against Christian churches of all denominations, has grown in recent years and now in the past several days, especially in Jakarta and in the western part of Java island. We are increasingly concerned about it." This is what Fides has been told by Bishop Johannes Pujasumarta, Bishop of Bandung and Secretary General of the Bishops' Conference of Indonesia. "Those responsible are small radical Islamic groups that are sowing panic among our people, especially in the Dioceses of Jakarta, Bandung, and Bogor. They are minority groups, but they should be stopped. The violence also increases the indifference of the civil authorities and police, who shrug off the violence. We demand more attention and protection for the Christian communities and that such acts may not remain unpunished," says the Bishop.
A documented and detailed report, describing the latest incident, was sent to Fides from the Indonesian Christian Communication Forum (ICCF), an organization that brings together leaders of different Christian denominations, and monitors the situation and violence against Christians in Indonesia.
The report, released yesterday in a public conference in Jakarta, recalled that last October 17 radical Islamic groups threatened to attack a Catholic church in Karanganyar, Central Java. Days earlier, on October 13, in Sukoharjo, in the same area, 12 militants on motorcycles set fire to a Protestant church. On October 12, there was another attempt, fortunately with little damage, striking St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Klaten, also in central Java. The Forum recalled that last September a Catholic church was struck in the Province of Pasir, in Borno Indonesia. This latest episode presents the real possibility of extremist attacks entering into other provinces of the country, althouhgh most of the episodes of violence were registered in the suburbs of Jakarta and in west and central Java.
According to data provided by the Forum, the attacks against Christian religious buildings have continued to increase since the independence of Indonesia (1945) to date: between 1945 and 1967, two churches were burned; between 1967 and 1969 (after the rise to power of Suharto), 10 were attacked. Between 1969 and 1998, the budget has shot up to 460 attacks (especially after Suharto's measure regulating the creation of places of worship). But, even after the start of the new era of reforms, the situation does not seem to have improved. Over the last decade, the Forum has monitored more than 700 attacks, bringing the total number of violent incidents against churches between 1945 and 2010, the dramatic figure of 1,200.
Fr. Benny Susetyo, Secretary of the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue within the Catholic Bishops' Conference, in explaining the document, stressed that "the attacks are possible due to the negligence of the police," noting the significant risk that they "will continue until the violent are guaranteed impunity."
In explaining the strategies of the Church to Fides, Bishop Pujasumarta concludes: "In Indonesia we - authorities, religious leaders, civil society – are all called to defend the idea and the model of a pluralistic and harmonious society. Thus, dialogue remains the main way. In particular, we will continue to seek support and solidarity from moderate Muslim groups, who represent the vast majority of Indonesian Islam." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 25/10/2010)

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