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AFRICA/ZAMBIA - The inequitable distribution of national wealth helps to provoke ethnic tensions

Lusaka (Agenzia Fides) - The increase in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) does not automatically translate into improved living conditions for the local people, says a note sent to Fides by the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection in Lusaka, Zambia. Zambia's GDP grew by 6% annually in recent years, and, according to estimates by 7% in 2010, while the prospects for 2011 are even better.
The Jesuits, in recognizing these macro-economic progresses, recall however, that “economic growth does not automatically translate into economic development through the trickledown effect,” the theory according to which the wealth accumulated by a few will also have a positive impact on the poorer sections of society, increasing the social welfare of the whole of society.
“The highly publicized trickledown theory,” continues the statement, “is more a form of political rhetoric than reality. It can produce economic growth, but does not always guarantee economic development. The people of Zambia need to see tangible things, such as access to quality health services, drinking water, housing and a decent job, to feel the effect of growth and not simply economic statistics.”
“The economic growth for which we are so proud must not allow us to lose sight of the goal of eradicating poverty and inequality in Zambia,” say the Jesuits. The clerics criticise in particular the way in which wealth is redistributed: “a growing economy that allocates only 0.2% of the 2011 budget to social funds for the people most vulnerable, who constitute the majority of the population, and allows only 36% of the population to live above the poverty line, is not growth to be proud of. After putting the economy on the path of growth, the Government faces a greater challenge: ensuring that economic growth is equally shared. The UN Human Development Index of 2010 has clearly shown how living conditions have deteriorated in Zambia, and how the country is one of three countries that are worse off than they were in 1970.”
The unequal distribution of wealth is also generating breakaway tensions in the Western Province. At the beginning of January, in Mungu, the capital of the province, there were clashes causing deaths and injuries among police and demonstrators, who demanded the removal of persons not from the area. The Western Province is home to the Lozi, one of Zambia's 73 ethnic groups. At the time of the British Mandate, the province was known as Barotseland, which means “land of the Lozi.” (LM) (Agenzia Fides 27/1/2011)

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