



ASIA/INDONESIA - Inter-faith Harmony Week begins, but attacks rise against minorities

Jakarta (Agenzia Fides) – Inter-faith Harmony Week began in Jakarta yesterday, 5 February, with messages of dialogue and peace, with hopes for reconciliation and calls for tolerance. Thousands of believers from all religions – Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist – crowded the streets of the Capital to celebrate the initiative by the United Nations. In Indonesia both religious communities and institutions intend to celebrate this with a special emphasis. But the event was also marked by violence: yesterday three members from the “Ahmadiyah” Islamic sect were killed and others were injured in the Pandeglang district (province of Banten, West Java). The Ahmadis are being targeted by Muslim extremists who consider them “heretics”.

“It is a sad episode, a massacre, the outcome of spiralling violence. We pray for the victims and pray for unity. This and other incidents convince us even more of the urgency to cultivate inter-religious dialogue and harmony,” Bishop Johannes Maria Pujasumarta, Secretary of the Episcopal Conference, told Fides. “The goal of the Week for Harmony, then, is to reduce tensions and strengthen the climate of friendship and brotherhood among believers of different religions, which has always been a character of Indonesian society,” said the Bishop. Din Syamsuddin, known Muslim leader, vice president of the Indonesian Council of Ulema (MUI) and head of the Inter-Religious Council of Indonesia, speaking to an audience of all religions, also remarked: “It is our hope that this event will send a message to followers of all religions in Indonesia: to construct, as a nation, unity and harmony.”

For some time communities of religious minorities have been reporting a growing climate of intolerance (see Fides 25/10/2010). In recent days, a report by well-known independent research institute “Setara Institute for Peace and Democracy” found that in 2010 there were over 216 cases of flagrant violations of religious freedom in Indonesia. The document, sent to Agenzia Fides, reports that 91 cases were recorded in the area of West Java, while in East Java there were 28 abuses.

Of these incidents, 75 relate to the Christian community and 50 were against followers of Ahmadiya. 43 Christian places of worship, says the report, were attacked, with grave violations of the right to worship by Christian communities. The police, it said, often covered up or avoided stopping the violence, perpetrated mainly by extremist Islamic groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front. The report criticizes the Government, and in particular the Ministry for Religious Affairs, which has not been able to guarantee the rights and freedoms of religious minorities. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 7/2/2010)