



## **ASIA/PAKISTAN - Christian threatened and accused of blasphemy, forced into hiding**

Mardan (Agenzia Fides) – “Convert or die”. Masih Gill, Christian from the city of Mardan, in the province of “Khyber Pakhtunkhwa” (Northern Pakistan), was threatened with these words by a group of Muslims with whom he had been speaking, after the recent episode of the burning of the Koran in the US. This event brought violent reactions in Pakistan (three churches attacked in a week) by Muslim extremists. Local sources say that Masih Gill simply defended his faith, saying that Christians respect all religions and do not nurture hostility towards anyone. The discussion then degenerated and the Muslims seriously threatened Gill. At the end of the fight, they also gave him intimidating notice that he would be incriminated for blasphemy.

Masih Gill, father, is now in hiding, and his family – thanks to the intervention of the Masihi Foundation who also defend Asia Bibi – will be transferred to a more secure place. The city of Mardan, in fact, is infested with radical Muslim groups which terrorise civilians, especially the religious minorities. “His story is one of many, and a fine example of the frustrations that Christians suffer daily”, explains Haroon Masih, Director of the Masihi Foundation. to Fides.

“We are witnessing an absurd escalation of violence in society. Every day there are attacks with many people killed and injured, as well as places of worship being targeted. In this dramatic situation, however, no one seems to intervene, and the civil authorities do not move,” says a source in the Catholic community to Fides, expressing serious concern.

“It’s a difficult time for the Christian community,” remarks Peter Jacob, Executive Secretary of the Commission for Justice and Peace for the Bishops of Pakistan. “We are always working to denounce and combat social discrimination against religious minorities. But now there is also a campaign of anti-Christian hatred and intolerance promoted by Islamic extremist groups. Christians are suffering and live in fear. Now the community’s hopes lie in the strength, good will and talent of the new Special Adviser for religious minorities, Paul Bhatti, brother of the slain minister. Christians in Pakistan and all minorities need a voice that promotes and protects their rights at the institutional level.” (PA) (Agenzia Fides 5/4/2011)