



## **ASIA/PAKISTAN - A Hindu or a Christian in Parliament? Controversy about the vacant seat of Shahbaz Bhatti**

Islamabad (Agenzia Fides) – There is current controversy about who will occupy the seat left vacant in the Pakistani Parliament by Shahbaz Bhatti, the Minister for Minorities that was killed a month ago. The seat is reserved for religious minorities. According to regulations, in the case where it becomes vacant, the first person who did not get elected takes the seat. This person would be Hindu leader Khatu Mal Jeewan, and the second on the list is Catholic Javed Michael. Initially, the electoral commission allotted the seat to Javed Michael (see Fides 7/3/2011), since Khatu Mal Jeewan was already a Senator. Now, though, the Hindu Senator has declared that he intends to occupy his seat in the National Assembly, communicating his resignation to the Senate. The Election Commission will rule on the case, and, according to Fides sources in Pakistan, it could also end up in legal action. The move by Khatu Mal Jeewani to choose a less prestigious job, leaving the Senate, could only be seen as political manoeuvring by the Pakistan People's Party, the party currently in power. The seat he would vacate in the Senate, in fact, would then be occupied by a candidate very close to President Asif Zardari. At the same time Khatu Mal Jeewani, as a member of the National Assembly, could then be appointed as the new federal minister for religious minorities in the seat of Shahbaz Bhatti, assuming his portfolio and functions.

“Christians may well lose a seat in Parliament,” says a local priest to Fides, with particular disappointment. Even Peter Jacob, Executive Secretary of the Commission for Justice and Peace for the Pakistani Bishops considers it a case of “political games that often do not look to the wellbeing of the Country.”

Paul Bhatti, on the other hand, the current Special Advisor to the Prime Minister for Minority Affairs, confirmed to Fides that he accepted the assignment only when the Prime Minister assured him of the duties, budget and the office of the murdered Minister, guaranteeing “the political capacity to be able to work for the religious minorities in Pakistan.” (PA) (Agenzia Fides 5/4/2011)