



ASIA/PAKISTAN - Blasphemy: a moratorium urgently needed

Faisalabad (Agenzia Fides) – The new case of Christian Arif Masih, falsely accused victim of blasphemy, relaunches the proposal for a moratorium on the application of the blasphemy law in Pakistan. Paul Bhatti, Special Advisor to the Prime Minister for religious minority affairs, welcomes the proposal circulating in civil society in Pakistan, and that is finding the support from intellectuals, journalists, scholars and human rights activists.

“We urgently need to find a solution to prevent this abuse of the law. We can start with a moratorium or consider amendments. But we must also work to change the mentality and culture in Pakistan where there are individuals and organisations who use this law to create disharmony and social tension,” says Bhatti.

Mehdi Hasan, President of the “Human Rights Commission of Pakistan”, says to Fides: “We are fundamentally in favour of a moratorium on blasphemy, even if our official position is to demand its abolition. Do you remember that before 1986 there were no complaints of blasphemy in Pakistan, and after that, in 20 years, there have been about 1,000 cases, while 70 of these people accused of blasphemy were victims of extrajudicial killings.”

Fr Mario Rodrigues, Director of the Pontifical Mission Societies in Pakistan tells Fides: “The blasphemy law is called the 'black law'. Today those who oppose it are known as blasphemers and their lives are threatened. The idea of applying a moratorium seems good to me: it would at least prevent new cases built on false accusations.”

Haroon Barkat Masih, head of the Masihi Foundation, which provides legal assistance to Asia Bibi, a woman sentenced to death for blasphemy, tells Fides: “The moratorium would be a first step to preventing further harm by the law. On one hand, the Government could say to the radical Islamic groups that the law remains in force, but in the meantime be able to stop the abuse and exploitation.”

Two concrete proposals to prevent abuses of the law are these: to give the task of registering the complaints of blasphemy to senior police officers; to directly entrust the High Court with the processes, thereby bypassing the courts of first instance which are too exposed to pressure. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 9/4/2011)