



ASIA / PAKISTAN - A church attacked, Christians arrested in Punjab; Arif Masih released , wrongly accused of blasphemy, thanks to Muslim witnesses

Lahore (Fides Service) - The church of the "United Pentecostal Church" in Jinnah Road, in Gujranwala (in Ounjab) was attacked yesterday, April 17, by a mob of radical muslims who stopped the celebration of Palm Sunday. The assembly of hundreds of Christians gathered broke up and the faithful were chased: many were beaten. As a consequence of the incidents, 12 Christians were arrested by the police. This is what Fides learns from local Christians, eyewitnesses, who speak of a "terrified community". Above all the pastor of the church, who had demanded the release of Mushtaq Gill and his son, Farrukh Mushtaq Gill, April 16 arrested on false charges of blasphemy, was in the target of extremists. Seeing that the pastor was able to escape, the militants captured an elder of the community, Anwar Khok, and his son and were beaten and kidnapped for hours, saying they would have released them only "in exchange of the Pastor". These are the consequences of the attacks which took place Saturday, April 16, when the Christian village of Khokarkari near Gujranwala (Punjab) was attacked after the quarrel between a Christian, Mushtaq Gill and some local Muslims, who had accused the man and his son Farrukh of blasphemy. The two remain in prison.

"In these recent incidents it is clear that the police are accomplices of the militants, because they arrest Christians, victims of attacks", Haroon Barkat Masih, Director of the Masihi Foundation told Fides, who is responsible for defending the persecuted Christians, including Asia Bibi.

The Foundation also reported to Fides that Arif Masih, a Christian arrested in Faisalabad on false charges of blasphemy, was released and the charges against him have been cleared. The Foundation has presented to the police 50 people, all Muslims, who have testified in favour of Arif, denying any charges against him. The witnesses were still threatened with weapons by a crowd of radicals who wanted to prevent them to make statements in favour of Arif. Arif is now with his family in a secret place, protected by the Foundation Masishi, because his life is at risk. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 18/04/2011)