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ASIA/PAKISTAN-Persecuted Christians and minorities under siege: the Report carried out by a Muslim Research Centre

Karachi (Agenzia Fides) - In Pakistan there has been a steady increase in violence against religious minorities and Christians "they are the first victims of persecutions": it is an issue that the government must face in order to guarantee freedom, democracy and the legally constituted state. This is what is said according to a new report entitled "A Question of Faith" published in recent days by the "Jinnah Institute, a prestigious center for research and analysis of Pakistan, based on the principles of the founder of the country, Mohammed Ali Jinnah. The Study Centre is now chaired by the Parliamentary Muslim Sherry Rehman, Pakistan People's Party, the party currently in power in Pakistan.

The report, a copy of which was sent to Fides, considers freedom of religious minorities critical in the country and that is why the government has 23 recommendations which include: abolishing the blasphemy law, or at least substantially modify it to prevent abuse; to approve new articles of the Pakistan Penal Code to punish those who incite religious hatred or violence; to remove the impunity guaranteed to Muslim leaders who preach in mosques; reform the police and the judiciary system. The Report calls on the Government to review the system of Islamic Courts and to establish a new independent authority, the "Special Ombudsman "(on the model of the defender of the rights of citizens across the European Union), which may be point of reference for the protection of women and minorities.

"We totally agree and we are delighted that a prestigious institution expression of Muslim intelighentia in the country, highlights these issues and talks about the persecution of Christians" Fr. Mario Rodrigues, director of the Pontifical Mission Societies in Pakistan tells Fides. "We know that Sherry Rehman risks her life because she exposes herself on such delicate issues: we thank her and express our full solidarity. I do not think, however, that the government will seriously address the question of religious minorities status. But this Report gives us hope that something is moving in the public and civil society of Pakistan".

The Report denounces the serious condition of discrimination faced by religious minorities in Pakistan. The research is based on interviews with 125 civil society leaders, non-governmental organizations, minority religious communities, carried out between December 2010 and April 2011. The text documents the progressive deterioration of social and economic status of religious minorities and "the increasing violence against them." Analyzing the situation of Christians, Hindus and Ahmadis - all targets of violence and discrimination –one notes in particular that "the condition of Christians has deteriorated significantly" and that "Christians are the first victims of persecution", "they feel they are second class citizens", " they are discriminated in all spheres of public life". In rural areas they are particularly weak and defenseless victims of abuse and oppression by wealthy Muslims. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 06/06/2011)

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