



ASIA/PAKISTAN-The Vatican Observer at the United Nations: the case of Farah-only a UN intervention

Geneva (Agenzia Fides) - The case of Farah Hatim, the Christian girl kidnapped and forced into marriage and conversion to Islam "is an abuse of freedom of conscience and religion", so "an intervention of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights " is desirable, because " freedom of religion is a test for the respect of all human rights". This is what His Exc. Mgr.Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the UN Office in Geneva said in an interview to Fides. Commenting on the case of Farah Hatim, Mgr. Tomasi notes that in Pakistan "a revision of the judicial system" is needed so the rights of minorities can really be protected.

Excellency, are you aware of the case of Farah Hatim? What is your opinion?

Farah Hatim is one of many cases reported by the media or private family communications or by the local Churches of Pakistan: these are cases of Christian girls kidnapped, forced to marry, renounce their faith and forced to Islam. According to Farah's family, this is what is happening: the girl was taken against her will. The problem is that no one can communicate with her now. There should be a mechanism that, in these situations, allows a direct dialogue with the lawyers, with the family, with state officials to investigate and ascertain the truth. In our experience, it is a violation of human rights, freedom of conscience and religion, and abuse on personal freedom, freedom to choose how to live one's life.

The Pakistani Church is trying to release her, some Catholic NGOs are also involved: do you think an action by the UN Council for Human Rights would be desirable?

I think so: when there are such situations of persecution against religious minorities, Christians or other faiths, it is important that detailed documentation is made available to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. These, according to the mandate it covers should start a formal investigation. Some Catholic NGOs accredited to the UN are receiving direct information from Pakistan and are collecting data to present a report to the UN Council, so that, according to criteria of objectivity and transparency, even in these difficult situations the main principles of human rights can be applied. Solidarity with Christians who suffer for their faith and, in cases like this must be remembered, I think the facilities of the international community, created for the protection of persecuted people should be used. Moreover, indifference on behalf of Western media should be shaken, because they often do not report the discrimination that millions of believers suffer.

How do you assess the situation of Christian minorities in Pakistan?

The Holy See's permanent mission in Geneva has regularly intervened on the issue of discrimination and violence, especially in support of freedom of conscience and religion. As highlighted by the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II and Benedict XVI, religious freedom is a test for the respect of human rights. In Pakistan we must inscribe the issue in the general context of the country, where there are problems in the education system, problems of corruption and widespread extremism. The country faces difficult nodes in the social and political context. A key point is that judicial structures objectively become available for all minorities: if the judicial system does not work, either for political pressure or major economic powers, deliberately ignore proper procedures, minorities will not find a right way for the protection of their rights, which becomes conditioned by the circumstances. We must also promote an education system which focuses on respect for others, such as the pre-requisite for creating a society of coexistence and peace.

A debatable point is the so-called "blasphemy law" ...

The "blasphemy law" (Articles 295b and 295c of the Penal Code) is a sore point for the issue of religious freedom in Pakistan. The law is considered unjust by many people, even Muslims in Pakistan. It is indicative that the Federal Minister for religious minorities, Shabaz Bhatti, was killed for his desire to change it, to prevent abuse and the damage created on innocent victims. Trying to change this law is, for the Christian communities that often are the victims, a top priority: such perverse mechanism justifies attacks on innocent people and produces a constant threat and uncertainty, especially for Christian families and other religious minorities.

What is the hope and the work of the Holy See in this situation?

The work of the Holy See, through multilateral diplomacy at the UN Council for Human Rights, is to highlight the issues and to broaden the perspective more and more to show that religion is not a source of conflict but the basis of universal principles that can be a help to live in pluralism and to build brotherhood and peace. With the reality of globalization today all societies must confront each other. Social cohesion cannot be imposed by forcing people to stay inside oppressive patterns. Freedom of religion, the right to change religion, respect for minority groups, are binding exigencies. We hope that the changes under way in North Africa and the Middle East will lead to greater openness of the societies involved, giving hope to their people and ensuring a more dignified and free life for everyone, including Christians of Pakistan. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 15/06/2011)