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ASIA/INDIA-The Christian outcasts are organizing protests and hunger strike for equal rights

New Delhi (Agenzia Fides) Thousands of Dalits, Christians and Muslims, known as the "untouchables" of India, gathered in the streets of New Delhi to protest in favor of equal rights within society. In India, the Dalits, or outcasts occupy the lowest level in the social scale. Although the country has formally eliminated the caste system, it continues to survive in cultural practices and social institutions. The mass protest, which will last until 28 July and involves all the Christian denominations, was organized by the National Coordination Committee for Dalit Christians, by the National Council of Dalit Christians, and by the Indian Episcopal Conference. Out of a population of over 1 billion and 250 million people, the Dalits are about one quarter of the Indian society. According to the international organization of Dalit Freedom Network defense, the group includes the largest number of people classified as victims of modern slavery. They are also the group of people at highest risk of violence and human trafficking in the country. Although all Dalits undergo discrimination in the country, Christians and Muslims face additional difficulties. The protests are directed to the government in order to revise the current law to extend equal constitutional rights to Dalit Christians and Muslims. According to the Indian Constitution or "Scheduled Castes Order", the law provides economic loans, social and educational opportunities only to Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh Dalits, these opportunities are denied to Dalit Christians and Muslims. The Catholic Bishops of the country say that the biggest obstacle is not the constitution but the reluctance of leaders to extend basic rights to Dalit Christians and Muslims. The Bishops also expressed the hope that these protests will increase pressure on government leaders and favor the constitutional change. (AP) (Fides 25/7/2011)

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