



## **ASIA/SRI LANKA - Citizens and religious communities together to save a mosque and defend minorities**

Colombo (Agenzia Fides) - Associations, ordinary citizens, believers of all religions unite in Sri Lanka for the protection of religious minorities and to defend the mosque of Dambulla, a city in the center of the island: an appeal to the government has been launched to ensure rights, religious freedom, the dignity of all citizens and all believers, especially those belonging to minority religious communities. The Civil Society Forum, which includes members of all religions, has published a "Declaration against religious intolerance", condemning in particular the recent attack on the mosque in Dambulla by a group of activists and Buddhist monks. The Hindu community, notes the appeal sent to Fides, was also asked to move a temple that rises from the vicinity. The mosque of Dambulla was founded over 60 years ago, and administrators of the mosque possess documents of the rightful ownership of the site and building. On 20 April, a delegation of Buddhist monks and activists expressed the request of demolition because "the mosque and the temple are built on sacred Buddhist land." After public discussion, in the following days the government announced that the Muslim community will have three months to find an alternative ground and move the mosque. All this "without listening to the Muslims faithful or allowing them to express their opinions," notes the appeal, calling the decision unfair and asking for a negotiated solution. The more than 30 organizations, including Catholic groups, that have signed the appeal noted that "for over 60 years, people in the Muslim region have been living together with other believers, in a spirit of friendship. But now we realize that religious intolerance is increasing and the state has done little to control it."

The incident in Dambulla is not an isolated case. Last year, a Muslim shrine was destroyed in Anuradhapura. In Ashraf Nagar the army seized a land that belonged to 69 Muslim families. In Illangaithurai Muhathuwaram instead of a Hindu shrine a Buddhist statue was built. In February last year a church of the Assembly of God was attacked in Ambalangoda and a Pastor was assaulted in Kaluthara, on charges of "conversions". Also in Kaluthara, last year a group of Buddhist monks and activists attacked the Gospel Church and the police did not allow the Church to carry out its work claiming that it "violated peace."

"Sri Lanka is a multiethnic country, where multi-religious pluralism and the protection of religious and cultural rights and religious freedom is a fundamental principle of the Constitution and a guarantee for all citizens," notes the appeal, asking the President Mahinda Rajapaksa to take steps to guarantee religious minorities, working for national harmony and peaceful coexistence. Sri Lanka is mainly a Buddhist country where in the past, there were episodes of violence perpetrated by fundamentalist Buddhist fringes. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 27/4/2012)