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ASIA/INDONESIA - Churches closed, bans and threats to Christians: religious freedom denied in Sumatra

Medan (Agenzia Fides) – Threats to Christians, they are not allowed to gather to pray , churches are closed, appeasement of the civil authorities: is a disturbing picture on freedom of religion for Christians in Sumatra that emerges from the story of Fr. Markus Manurung, OFMCap, priest from Medan and head of the Commission "Justice and Peace" of the Province of the Capuchin monks on the island. "On the island of Sumatra - explains Fr. Manurung to Fides - there are six dioceses: the Archdioceses of Medan and Palembang; the dioceses of Sibolga, Padang, Pangkal Pinang and Tanjung Karang. Problems are occurring for Christians in Padang, Medan and Sibolga. In Padang, in rural and isolated areas, there are churches that despite lengthy bureaucratic procedures, have never had the permission to be built or to be restored. The community of Tirtanadi is not granted the permission to found a church and the faithful are forbidden to pray together. The church in west Pasuruan Ijin has not obtained the permission for the necessary repairs, as well as the church in Tembilahan, damaged by fire, where the faithful gather within the walls which are still blackened. In the church in Sawalunto , the faithful are not allowed to meet. In Bukit Tinggi the permission to build a new church, as happens in Kerinci-Kayu Aru has been denied. The license for the church in Pasir Pangarean was revoked, which had already been granted in the past."
In the Archdiocese of Medan, the major obstacles are encountered in the province of Aceh in northern Sumatra, where the Islamic law (Sharia) is in force, although it applies only to Muslim communities. However the influence of radical groups is very strong, said Fr. Teguh Bernard O Carm, the local Catholic priest to Fides. Fr. Teguh, pastor in the church in Sidikalang, in the district of Singkil, in the province of Aceh, told Fides the latest misfortunes suffered by the Christian community (see Fides 21/5/2012): "The Islamic Defender Forum, composed of radical organizations, puts pressure on the government to close the churches that are considered illegal, unauthorized churches or prayer halls. The local Government, fearing these violent organizations, is giving in." In the past, explains the pastor, a local regulation, approved in 1979 and updated in 2001, stated that to maintain religious harmony, the number of churches had to be limited." But - notes Fr. Bernard - there is no distinction between Catholic and Protestant churches. By applying a restrictive regulation, in May, government officials, police officers and members of radical Islamic groups made 23 churches of different denominations close down: 11 GKPPD churches (Protestant Christian Church of Pakpak Dairi); 6 Evangelical Church of Indonesia"; 3 Catholic churches, 2 GMI Methodist Church (Gereja Methodist Indonesia); one of the HKI (Huria Kristen Indonesia) churches.". The three Catholic churches are those in the districts of Balno Lae and Suka Makmur (dioceses of Sibolga), and the District Madumpang, in the Archdiocese of Medan.
Fr. Bernard reports that "some Protestant communities want to fight Islamic radicals to prevent such abuses, and this could lead to violence and conflict. We are trying to have a meeting with local tribal leaders and civil authorities, to discuss and raise issues of human rights and religious freedom. " (PA) (Agenzia Fides 31/5/2012)

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