



## **ASIA / PAKISTAN - The fact that President Musharraf will meet the Holy Father will boost Muslim Christian relations and help the battle to stop terrorism, chairman of the Catholic Bishops told Fides**

Lahore (Fides Service) - "We are very pleased that president Musharraf will have a meeting with the Pope. This will be good for the Church in Pakistan and for the whole country" Archbishop Lawrence Saldanha of Lahore told Fides with regard to the news that Pope John Paul II will receive the President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf in a private audience in the Vatican on Thursday 30 September.

"In these difficult times in which we are all trying to stop terrorism and religious fundamentalism, meetings and exchange of views and information are important because they help strengthen relations and build a spirit of reciprocal trust. President Musharraf is really making every effort to show that there exists a moderate and enlightened form of Islam and in this he has our full support. In my opinion the meeting between the Pope and Musharraf will be important from the symbolic point of view to improve Muslim-Christian relations in Pakistan and the rest of the world".

With regard to the present government Archbishop Saldanha is positive: "President Musharraf is in a very difficult position in which he has to deal with militant Islamic parties. As the Catholic Church in Pakistan we support his efforts to stand up to radical Islamic groups".

"The central government has passed laws which favour Christians. For example religion no longer affects voting rights and practices; Catholic schools and institutions nationalised in the past have been returned to the Church and our rights have been recognised. Now we are requesting the abolition of the blasphemy law and the hudud law or Sharia law on punishments introduced by General Zia and often misused against religious minority groups" the Archbishop told Fides.

"The Church in Pakistan is free to engage in normal life and activities and I see a rosy future ahead. We have strong hopes for times of tolerance and peace and are working in this direction and we see a positive attitude in government" the Archbishop said and he concluded: "My prayer is that this meeting of our President with the Holy Father will boost Muslim/Christian relations and promote harmony and prosperity for our nation".

Pakistan has a population of 155 million, 97%, Sunni Muslims, 20% Shiite Muslims and 2.5% Christians, including about 1.2 million Catholics.

(PA) (Agenzia Fides 28/9/2004 lines 38 words 388)