



## **ASIA/SYRIA - Christian and Sunni Civilians trapped in Homs: negotiations for a cease-fire**

Homs (Agenzia Fides) - There are approximately 800 civilians trapped in the historical center of Homs, to be rescued, while the fighting rages between the army and opposition forces barricaded in the city. Among the civilians, there are about 400 Christians and 400 Sunni Muslims settled in the neighborhoods of Bustan Diwan and Hamidiye, which constitute the oldest part of Homs. Civilians risk finding themselves in the midst of gunfire and bombings, for this reason, as learned by Fides, the representatives of the Christian community and the newly-born non-violent popular initiative "Mussalaha" ("Reconciliation") have been working tirelessly for two days to negotiate a cease-fire for humanitarian reasons. Among the mediators, there are two Christian priests who, together with UN representatives, have woven thick talks with military leaders of the army and the military representatives of the opposition. In the middle of the difficult negotiations, a dual ceasefire: to allow humanitarian operators and UN convoys to enter the city and rescue the civilians and to allow the evacuation of civilians from the city. With regard to the first hypothesis of truce, the Free Syrian Army forces have placed a "veto". As for the second hypothesis, the Syrian army puts a stop, fearing that among civilian Sunnis, insurgents and terrorists can hide. "The situation is deadlocked and it is really critical for civilians, who in this period are exploited. Given the fierce fighting, there is the risk of many injuries or deaths among innocent people," notes with concern a source of Fides.

Meanwhile, according to the information Fides received, the various Bishops of Homs, of all denominations, express support for the popular non-violent "Mussalaha" ("Reconciliation") initiative, founded by the civil society of Homs, which has now received Christian, Sunni, Alawite, and other community support. As Fides learns, "full support and high hopes" have been expressed by the Syrian-Orthodox Bishop of Homs, Mgr. Silvanos; the Syrian Catholic Bishop Mgr. Kassab; the Maronite Bishop, Mgr. Gihad; and Greek orthodox Mgr. Abouzakah, who supervises the majority Christian community in Homs. For now, the ranks of the Syrian opposition to the initiative has not found strong support, according to some representatives it should be postponed until the revolution "has not achieved its main objectives." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 13/6/2012)