



## **ASIA/HOLY LAND - More protection for children with hearing problems, victims of serious developmental delays**

Bethlehem (Agenzia Fides) - More than 275 million people worldwide suffer from moderate or severe hearing problems. Among these, 80% live in countries with a low or average income. For the month of September, when school begins in most of the countries, the campaign "Health care, the right of all: ¡Actua!", promoted by the Catholic NGO Manos Unidas Spanish, is addressed to the Palestinian territories, specifically in Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, where there is a very high rate of children and young people with hearing problems. If these children do not receive the necessary care, they may face delays in language development and learning, as well as a serious lack of attention.

Already in 1964, when Pope Paul VI went to Holy Land, he made an appeal in favor of the many children with this disease who lived on the streets of Bethlehem, with no health care and on that occasion he showed his desire to create an educational center dedicated exclusively to their rehabilitation. Thus the Institute "Ephpheta Paul VI" was born, which seven years later, in 1971, began its work of audio phonetic rehabilitation with 24 deaf children. Currently, each year, the Institute is home to 150 deaf children, regardless of their religious beliefs. The students come from different places of Palestine such as Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, Ramallah, Hebron and Jericho. Unfortunately, the young children of Jerusalem and the north cannot attend the school because of the wall surrounding almost the entire city of Bethlehem. Most of the students, except for 20 girls, return back home in the evening. The construction of the wall has also affected agriculture, which is the main means of subsistence, and consequently the local economic development. Since 2000, unemployment and poverty have increased to such an extent that 60% of all Palestinian families in the area are poor. In Palestine, 3% of the population suffers from hearing problems. In some remote villages, the percentage increases to 15%, one of the highest in the world. Deafness in this area is mainly due to hereditary factors. In the country, in fact, 40% of marriages are between relatives. (AP) (Agenzia Fides 11/09/2012)