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Fondata nel 1927

ASIA/PHILIPPINES - Catholic pastoral operator Killed on the islets of "Abu Sayyaf"

Bongao (Agenzia Fides) - The Catholic Conchita Francisco, 62, pastoral worker, a widow and mother of two children, was shot to death, by unidentified men in front of the Catholic Cathedral of Bongao, in the Philippine province of Tawi- Tawi in the south of the archipelago. This is confirmed to Fides Agency by Fr. Eliseo Mercado, of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), a professor at the Notre Dame University of Cotabato, who was visiting the province, saying that the murder took place on November 13, while the woman had just left the church, where she had led the recitation of the Rosary and participated in the Holy Mass.
The province of "Tawi-Tawi" (near the island of Jolo) is made up of a small ring of islands which, together with Sulu, are in the extreme south of the Philippines. This is an area where the presence of Muslim rebels, pirates, terrorist groups and criminals for years have held in check the Philippine military. The islands are infested by the cells of "Abu Sayyaf" terrorist Islamic group, responsible for numerous attacks and murders.
As reported to Fides, the Catholic community, which has 2% of the local population, all Muslim, is in shock over the incident. The Apostolic Vicar of Jolo, His Exc. Mgr. Angelito Lampon, OMI, has expressed his bitterness about the murder that "deprived the community of an authentic witness of the Gospel." The Apostolic Vicar yesterday celebrated Conchita’s funeral, called "Ching", who was a pillar in the pastoral activities of the small local church. Conchita’s husband had died ten years ago, who was also killed in a violent manner.
The woman was a Headmistress and according to some sources, the murder could be linked to questions concerning her work on the university campus grounds. Police are investigating and have not yet shed light on the crime.
Fr. Mercado recalls that other two people working in the “Mindanao State University” (MSU) were killed on the campus in Marawi City (Mindanao), on 25 October: prof. Othello Cobal and his assistant Erwin Diaz, 24 years of age. A gang of thugs entered the campus, shot them and set fire to offices. "The culprits of these crimes are on the loose and continue to threaten the civilian community with impunity" denounces to Fides the missionary. The MSU, often compared to a "microcosm of the emerging Muslim region Bangsamoro" has become "a laboratory of crime" and that is why students and teachers have asked the government to intervene to ensure legality.
The Jesuit Fr. Albert Alejo SJ, engaged in civil society in Zamboanga City, told Fides: "Violence in Mindanao and the Sulu islands is a widespread reality. The province of Tawi-Tawi is militarized, there are many soldiers and too many weapons among civilians. Violence and murder at times can be reduced to electoral reasons, in other cases to the claims of groups and Muslim factions. For example, a very strong group in the area, the 'Moro National Liberation Front' (MNLF) did not accept the recent peace agreement with the Philippine government from the 'Moro Islamic Liberation Front' (MILF), and this creates further tension ". (PA) (Agenzia Fide 16/11/2012)

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