



ASIA/MYANMAR - The Bishops: Obama's visit gives hope for democracy and religious freedom

Yangon (Agenzia Fides) - "President Obama's visit is certainly a very positive sign for the country and will be an encouragement to continue on the path of reform towards democracy and religious freedom" is what His Exc. Mgr. Charles Bo, Salesian, Archbishop of Yangon and Secretary General of the Episcopal Conference of Mysnmar says to Fides Agency, commenting on the Asian tour of the U.S. President, Barak Obama, today in Myanmar.

The Archbishop, who is also President of the Episcopal Commissions for Formation and for Interreligious Dialogue, expresses "the great hope of the Bishops and of all Christians in Myanmar especially with regard to freedom" after a historic visit that in the country has experienced great public success. President Obama met with both the head of government, Thein Sein, and opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

The Archbishop told Fides: "The visit was very friendly. The crowd was cheering. I think the event is a very positive note in the development process towards democracy. For some, President Obama had to wait a while 'before carrying out this step. But we are sure that there will be positive benefits at a social and political level for the population, and also in the field of education and health care."

A desired effect is related to religious freedom: "On the ground there are different situations - explains to Fides the Archbishop - but the general trend is positive. Obama spoke of freedom of worship, which is preliminary to full religious freedom. As Bishops we are hopeful. I believe that the government is moving in the right direction on the delicate issue of freedom. During the visit, amnesty was granted to 518 prisoners, giving a sign of good will."

The visit is taking place while the country is crossed by serious ethnic conflicts, such as that between the army and the rebel Kachin (in the north of the country) or that among Buddhist and Muslim Rohingyas groups in Rakhine State. "For these thorny issues, I do not think that Obama's visit will have a direct and immediate impact: it takes more time, we are faced with complex situations, in which the word order, more necessary than ever, is reconciliation: from here we must start to heal these wounds which are still bleeding and pacify the country." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 19/11/2012)