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# ASIA/SYRIA - The Maronite Bishop of Latakia: "Christians targeted by radical Islamists and bandits"

Latakia (Agenzia Fides) - In the area of Latakia, Tartus and Tal khalakh, and in the "Valley of the Christians", "there is chaos: Islamist militias and criminal gangs are taking advantage of the situation of general instability. The Christian civilians are kidnapped and targeted by armed groups who have fundamentalist ideology": this is the alarm raised by His Exc. Mgr. Elias Sleiman, Maronite Bishop of Latakia who, in a note sent to Fides Agency, expresses strong concerns about the fate of the Christian population of Syria.
"Christians, one tenth of the Syrian population - remarks the Bishop - do not stand up against one or the other faction fighting, but just want peace, dialogue and reconstruction of the country. For our faith we do not believe in violence, but in reconciliation. Now we fear greatly the radical Islamists: there are many fundamentalist mercenaries who want to alter the nature of the Syrian people and incite sectarian war."
"The Christian faithful - he explains - even if threatened, do not take up arms because they do not want power. We want peace, not weapons, as pointed out by Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to Lebanon." Expressing concern that Syria "will become another Iraq, with a mass exodus of the faithful," Mgr. Sleiman reiterates that "the Syrian Church, in its various forms and denominations, is in solidarity with those who want to remain in their own land." To this he adds, "we do a lot for refugees in the Valley of the Christians, Latakia, Tartus, who are more than 100 thousand. The Christian refugees had come here because it was more stable than in other areas where the fighting raged. But now the conflict has arrived here and there is no more stability, while chaos increases. " "Our land is a land of martyrs, we will not leave - the Bishop prophesies - even if we are or will be under pressure. We are strong in faith, in spite of the trials and will always try to be a factor of cohesion and a sign of reconciliation in the Syrian society, today and tomorrow, " he concludes. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 13/12/2012)

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