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OCEANIA/PAPUA NEW GUINEA - Muslims in Papua: the new frontier of Islam in Oceania

Gooroka (Agenzia Fides) - Papua New Guinea is the new frontier for the expansion of Islam in Oceania: as reported to Fides by the local Church, Islam arrived in Papua New Guinea about 35 years ago, when a mosque near Kimbe, West New Britain was open. As Fr. Franco Zocca SVD, a missionary in Goroka and scholar of Islam explains to Fides, Muslims in the area take inspiration from an Islamic reform movement founded in India in the late nineteenth century, called "Ahmadi".
Islam was officially registered in the state in 1983, with the recognition of the "Islamic Society of Papua New Guinea", and from that moment on, Muslims who came from outside started "recruiting" at a local level, with an exponential growth. In 1986, the Muslims of Papua were four, in 1990 they had grown to 440 and in 2000, their number had risen to 756, scattered in different provinces of the country.
Today, according to the "Islamic Center" in Port Moresby, the local Muslim population has about 4,000 people. According to local Muslim leaders, Islam is growing rapidly especially in the Highlands region, especially in the province of Simbu, and has been successful especially in the Melanesian population who had not converted to the Christian faith in the past. Muslim leaders believe that the interest derives "from the respectable behavior of Muslims, to the prohibition of alcohol and other intoxicating subtances" and that Islam "gives guidelines that direct the whole life of believers." The leaders believe that Islamic practices are more compatible, compared to the Christian ones, with the Melanesian values and traditional costumes. As an example, they cite the acceptance of polygamy, the separation between men and women, the "supremacy" assigned to man in the family.
Currently, the Muslim community in Papua is served by 15 Islamic centers led by imams, while the Muslim youth in Papua New Guinea receive scholarships to study abroad in Islamic schools in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Fiji. Upon returning home, they will become teachers, scholars and Koran jurists.
For Interreligious Relations, since 2002, the Commission for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue of the Catholic Bishops' Conference has organized meetings with representatives of the Muslim community and dialogue is still continuing. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 26/02/2013)

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