



ASIA/PAKISTAN - Christians Protest in Lahore, hundreds arrested by the police: the Bishops at the sit-in

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) - High social and religious tension in Lahore, after the episode on Saturday, March 9, when 178 Christians houses in "Joseph colony", in the district of Badami Bagh, were set on fire, in a case of alleged blasphemy (see Fides 09/03/2013). Christian communities are in turmoil and yesterday, in a spontaneous and peaceful street demonstration in Lahore, joined by citizens of other religions, the police fired tear gas and beat protesters, saying that "the demonstration was not authorized." Among the young Christians present, who gathered in Ferozepur Road, two have broken legs and hundreds of protesters were arrested. "It is a further violation of human rights of this community," say to Fides some Catholics in the Church of San Francesco, located right on Ferozepur Road, Lahore. Even the building of the church was hit and the cross on the church was damaged. The Church of St. Francis is also engaged in educational activities, with schools ranging from kindergarten through secondary school. But, because of the tensions, the families have decided not to send their children to school today and in the coming days. "The police – says a source of Fides - has gone far beyond its role of ensuring order and intends to silence the voices of those who ask for justice."

Yesterday also a prayer vigil and a peaceful sit-in in front of the headquarters of the Press Association was held in Lahore. Among the faithful with lighted candles, there were the Archbishop of Karachi, Joseph Coutts, President of the Episcopal Conference, and Bishop Sebastian Francis Shaw OFM, Apostolic Administrator of Lahore, who just arrived from Rawalpindi, where he had concluded the Assembly of Pakistanis Bishops. Mgr. Shaw has asked the government to ensure the safety of Christians and urged the faithful to "overcome the climate of fear and uncertainty, and to maintain an atmosphere of peace and solidarity with the victims." Among those present, the Minister of State for Harmony, the Christian Akram Masih Gill, said that "Christians have played a key role in the creation of Pakistan" and asked the provincial government of Punjab and Muslim religious leaders to "come forward to ensure peace and harmony among religions."

Peaceful gatherings of prayer and fasting, to condemn the violence and to demand respect for human rights and peace, were held in Faisalabad, Sargodha and Karachi, where there were more than a thousand Christian women. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 11/03/2013)