



ASIA/SRI LANKA - The case of the Buddhist "Taliban" explodes: Church re-launches the work for religious harmony

Colombo (Agenzia Fides) - The group of Buddhist fundamentalist monks, extremist and violent seriously concern civil society and religious minorities. This is the alarm sent to Fides Agency by His Exc. Mgr. Raymond Wickramasinghe, Bishop of Galle, in southern Sri Lanka, expressing his fears for what happens in the country: it is the phenomenon of the so-called "Buddhist Taliban" - as they have been defined by the press - who have launched a wave of violence against religious minorities, Muslim and Christian. The group, reported for acts of intolerance is the "Bodu Bala Sana" (BBS, "Force of Buddhist power"), but it is not the only kind of movement that exists.

Bishop Wickramasinghe fears that - a few years after the end of the civil war - a new violence can tear apart society. For this reason he has decided to re-launch the promotion of dialogue and religious harmony through the Commission "Justice, Peace and Human Development." The Church has the task to "play a prophetic role," he remarked, although this could be misunderstood. The Bishop asks for the support and prayers of the Christian community around the world.

It should be noted that large traditional Buddhist organizations, entirely peaceful, disapprove the radical and violent approach, that sow the virus of hatred and religious fundamentalism in the Sri Lankan society. The religious Buddhist factor is an essential component of the identity of the Sinhalese, who form 70% of the population of 20.8 million inhabitants. The ethnic minority Tamils are predominantly Hindu, while there are also Christian minorities (8.8%) and Muslims (9.5%).

Over the last two months, violent acts have multiplied: two weeks ago, militants of the "Bodu Bala Sena" destroyed a textile factory belonging to a Muslim, on the outskirts of Colombo, while police assisted and left him to do so. Meanwhile, posters and drawings ridiculing Islam and its laws are being spread.

Recently, two churches were attacked and two others forced to close because of the pressure of the fanatics. Among the incidents reported to Fides, on March 9 in Batticaloa, members of the BBS set fire to a church at night. Buddhist monks accused the pastor of the "Fellowship Church" in the town of Polonnaruwa of "proselytizing", warning him to stop his ministry. On March 17, a mob led by Buddhist monks broke into a church in Agalawatte, stopping the worship. Similar threats happened at a meeting of the Pentecostal Church in Kottawa and in Galle. According to information sent to Fides, in 2012 the Christian communities in Sri Lanka, of different denominations, registered about 50 cases of attacks by Buddhist monks. In December, one thousand people in the grip of a religious fervor, including many Buddhist monks, attacked and wounded the pastor Pradeep in Weeraketiya. In September 2012, the Catholic Bishop of Mannar Mgr. Rayyappu Joseph was slightly injured by a stone-throwing, in the attack against a Catholic church in Karusal, in the district of Mannar (see Fides 15/12/2012).

At a political level, the President of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa, is riding these nationalistic and religious claims gaining political consensus. But, note sources of Fides, "if the BBS is not stopped a war of religion could be unleashed." With regards to the political scene there is a political party made up only by Buddhist monks, the "Jathika Hela Urumaya" ("National Front of Liberation"), a partner of the coalition government. The party has already shown in the past that it can be very violent. A militant of the party assassinated Prime Minister S. Bandaranaike in 1958. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 30/04/2013)