



## **ASIA/PAKISTAN - Extremists who burned the Christian area have been released; the man accused of blasphemy on trial**

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) - Hundreds of men who in March set fire to the Christian area of Lahore "Joseph Colony" were released by the police and out of 83 men identified and arrested, 31 have obtained bail. On the other hand Sawan Masih, the faithful Christian falsely accused of insulting the Prophet Mohammed - the incident that provided the pretext to unleash mass violence on Joseph Colony - will instead be tried in prison for blasphemy. This is a sensational court case that for months has occupied public opinion in Pakistan, raising anger and protests of the Church, civil society, sectors of politics. Sawan Masih was accused of blasphemy and, following accusations, on March 9, 2013 a crowd of about three thousand Muslims attacked the entire neighborhood where they lived, burning two churches and about 178 Christian homes (see Fides 9, 11 and 13/3/2103). In recent months, the government of Punjab has pledged to compensate the families and to rebuild the houses, but the issue of impunity remains an open wound.

"Most of the people who were stopped after the attack were declared innocent by the police and immediately released, for corruption or political pressure. Investigations continue and 31 of those who were arrested have been released on bail," explains to Fides Naeem Shakir, a Christian lawyer in Lahore. Meanwhile an appeal has been lodged against the decision of "provisional liberty", ordered by the High Court of Lahore.

Shakir is in the defense college of Sawan Masih who will be tried in jail for safety reasons: there are fears of an extrajudicial execution, as in many other cases of alleged blasphemy in Pakistan. "Masih is completely innocent. The trial has just begun and we will have the next hearing on June 12," says the lawyer. The college of defenders withdrew the request for bail for threats received against Masih. "They are two different cases: the first is based on the anti-terrorism law, the other on blasphemy. But they are a sign of bad and discriminatory functioning of the judicial system in Pakistan," notes Shakir's lawyer.

According to the complaint registered, the Muslim Shahid Imran heard Sawan use derogatory language towards the Prophet Muhammad. For this reason Masih is accused on the basis of Article 295c of the Pakistan Penal Code (one of the articles called "blasphemy law"), which also provides for the death penalty. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 06/06/2013)