



## **ASIA/PAKISTAN - From social conflict to religious violence: fear of Christians in Punjab**

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) - Interfaith tension in Rahim Yar Khan, a town in Punjab. An episode of conflict between Christians and Muslims has generated mass protests of Christians and could escalate into open anti-Christian religious violence, partly because some would like to turn it into a case of blasphemy. This is what Gulshan Barkat, a Pakistani priest and missionary of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate told Fides Agency, "the situation remains tense and uncertain" in the area of Bheel Nagar, called by Christians "Nazareth Colony", in Rahim Yar Khan, where 250 Christian, 70 Hindu, 200 Muslim families live.

On 21 June a Catholic boy named Sam, 8 years old, was accused by a Muslim man of having insulted his daughter. The Muslim has relatives in the extremist group "Sipah-e-Sahaba" (banned by the government for terrorism) who went to Patras Sadeeq's home, Sam's father, to protest. The heated conversation degenerated into a scuffle. The Muslims called the police who arrested Sam's brother, Ashley, 12 years old. Following this unprovoked act, the Christian community in the area blocked the main road of the city. Thanks to the Catholic lawyer Qamar Iqbal, Ashley was released. At that point the Christians decided to denounce Muslims for the attacks suffered before "these could invert the incident in a false case of blasphemy." In the meantime, the extremists belonging to the group "Sipa-e-Sahaba", about 100 armed men, took to the streets to put pressure on the police. Two faithful, Maqsood Barkat and Illyas Masih, while they were on their way to the police, they found themselves surrounded by 40 armed men, they were beaten and seriously injured. After the beating, Christians again took the streets, blocking traffic and freeing the circulation only after receiving guarantees of protection by the police. Also Fr. Francis Akuve, Catholic pastor of the Church of Santa Croce in Rahim Yar Khan, met the local chief police, presenting a letter and asking for a formal commitment from the police to ensure the safety of the Christians in Bheel Nagar.

The next day there was a meeting between Christian and Muslim representatives of the community to try to pacify the situation. According to local sources of Fides, there is fear of violent reactions or demonstrations by the extremist group "Sipah-e-Sahaba" against Christians. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 26/6/2013)