



## **ASIA/PAKISTAN - New Report: deterioration of religious freedom and increasing violence in the country**

Washington (Agenzia Fides) - In the past 18 months we have witnessed a gradual deterioration of respect for religious freedom in Pakistan. Religious minorities such as Shia Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Ahmadis are those who have suffered most, all victims of violence. This was stated in a new report sent to Fides Agency by the Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a bipartisan organ of the U.S. Congress. The report, titled "Pakistan: a history of violence", presents the results of the "Pakistan Religious Violence Project" a specific project initiated by the Commission. The Report tracked in the period from January 2012 to June 2013, 203 incidents of sectarian violence resulting in more than 1,800 casualties, including over 700 deaths.

According to the figure mentioned in the document sent to Fides, the Shia Muslim community has borne the brunt of attacks (77) from militants and terrorist organizations, some in sacred places. The report noted that between January 2012 and June 2013 there were 16 attacks against Hindus and 3 attacks against Sikhs, resulting in the death of one Sikh and two Hindus. The latter also recorded seven cases of rape against Hindu women. Christians, the text continues, suffered 37 targeted attacks, for a total of 11 deaths and 36 wounded, in addition to 5 cases of rape. Among the cases of violence against Christians, there are, among others, the attack against "Joseph Colony" in Lahore in March 2013 (180 houses and two churches destroyed) and attacks against the Church of San Francesco in Karachi and the Presbyterian Church of Faisalabad. Several incidents are related to allegations of alleged blasphemy. The most violent cities are Peshawar, Karachi and Quetta, but also different places of Punjab, such as Faisalabad.

Noting that the project's findings "paint a grim and challenging picture for the new government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif", the Report states that "to stem the rising tide of violent religious extremism, concrete and decisive action is needed to ensure that perpetrators are arrested, tried and jailed".

If many of the attacks against religious minorities are carried out by individuals and extremist groups, "government actors are not blameless", the Report said, suggesting that often "police officers have turned a blind eye to mob attacks or have refused to file police reports when victims belong to religious minorities". "The climate of impunity threatening all Pakistanis, regardless of their faith - the text concludes - is also exacerbated by the much-abused blasphemy law". (PA) (Agenzia Fides 19/07/2013)