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OCEANIA/PAPUA NEW GUINEA - The Church deplores the agreement between Australia and Papua New Guinea on refugees

Port Moresby (Agenzia Fides) - The Church in Papua New Guinea expressed great sadness and strongly criticizes the recent agreement between Australia and Papua New Guinea on the treatment and resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers. The note sent to Fides by the Episcopal Commission for Social Issues, states: "The Bishops' Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands was taken by surprise by the announcement that all asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by boat will be transported on the island of Manus, Papua New Guinea, and those deemed 'genuine refugees' will be resettled in Papua New Guinea and other islands of the Pacific".
According to many observers, with the agreement, Australia on the eve of the election, "would unload" the problem of the influx of refugees in a country like Papua, among the poorest in the world, unprepared, and already struggling with serious social problems.
The Bishops recall that "in Papua New Guinea compassion for those in need is not lacking", and noted that "the country, in this moment in its history, does not have the capacity to accommodate a considerable influx of refugees and provide for their immediate needs".
Papua New Guinea is "rightly proud of the protection guaranteed by its Constitution to all people, citizens and non-citizens alike." Thus, the text continues, "is it right to lead people beyond our borders against their will? Is it fair to keep people who have broken our laws in detention camps? ".
In fact, as pointed out by a recent report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the conditions of living in the center of the island of Manus "do not meet the standards of international protection, and the current situation in Manus is likely to cause damage at a psychosocial level". The Bishops, therefore, ask the government that new refugees will arrive in Papua New Guinea only if " tructures and conditions that welcome them are radically improved". The strongest appeal is to the government of Australia, "so that it can find a more humane solution for people seeking asylum in their country", says the text, since "in the treatment of refugees for political, religious and economic reasons fundamental principles of human rights are involved".
According to Fr. Philip Gibbs SVD, Secretary of the Commission, "Papua New Guinea has been led to believe in joining Australia in the campaign against human traffickers. But we suspect that the agreement is the result of political expediency at the expense of people in search of refuge". The Secretary also points out that "Holy Father Francis has recently expressed, during his trip to Lampedusa, the right attitude for all Christians", speaking of hospitality, solidarity and the fight against "globalization of indifference." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 23/07/2013)

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