



## **ASIA/INDIA - Church and civil society: it is urgent to release seven innocent Christians sentenced in Orissa**

New Delhi (Agenzia Fides) - The Indian Church and numerous organizations that defend human rights call for the release of seven Christians sentenced two days ago by a court of first instance in Orissa, for the alleged murder of a Hindu leader. The murder, though claimed by Maoists, was the pretext for the start of anti-Christian massacres in 2008, in which more than 100 faithful were killed, 600 Christian villages were looted, 5,600 homes burned, with over 54 thousand displaced people.

After the conviction, priests and civil society activists in Orissa launched a campaign for justice, and the Indian Bishops support such efforts, as reported to Fides by Fr. Charles Irudayam, Secretary of the Commission "Justice and Peace" of the Episcopal Conference: "First of all – he notes - we want to reiterate that the seven Christians are innocent. The same court that sentenced them, the day after the ruling, sentenced a Maoist leader for the crime of which the Christians are accused: this exonerates them permanently. The ruling is manifestly wrong and unjust. We call for the release of the seven innocent, sentenced without evidence", he explains.

The Indian Church, the priest says, "will appeal, before the High Court. But in the meantime the seven, remain in prison and the suffering of their families continues. Furthermore: who will pay the lawyers? And who will take care of their families and children? An adequate compensation will be needed". "The conviction - he concludes - is paradoxical: Christians in Orissa are still victims, not murderers, and many of them are still waiting for justice for the devastating violence they suffered".

The seven Christians in Orissa, falsely accused of having killed the Hindu leader Laxmanananda Saraswati, are called: Bijay Kumar Sunseth, Gornath Chalanseth, Budhadeb Nayak, Bhaskar Sunamajhi, Durjo Sunamajhi, Munda Badmajhi and Sanatana Badmajhi. Sajan George, leader of the "Global Council of Indian Christians", an NGO committed to the campaign for the release, said in a statement sent to Fides: "It is really a heartbreaking story for modern India . Seven people have already lost five precious years of their lives in prison without a fair trial. And thousands of other Christians who survived the most brutal wave of attacks, are still living in fear. Prosecutors and judges have intentionally delayed the trial". According to the leader, "the judiciary is influenced by Hindu nationalist groups and extremists." (PA) (Agenzia Fides 02/10/2013)