



ASIA/INDONESIA - Islamist militants block the construction of a Catholic church that has a valid permit

Jakarta (Agenzia Fides) - Christian and Muslim religious leaders have expressed dismay after fierce protests were organized in past days by Islamic fundamentalist groups to block the construction of a Catholic church in Tangerang, in the western part of Java island, about 25 kilometers from Jakarta. A garrison of more than 200 militants of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) tried to stop the establishment of the construction site. According to the local Church, Islamist groups are trying "to sow religious division". As reported to Fides, the Catholic faithful of the parish of Saint Bernadette say they have a valid permit to build the church, which can accommodate about 11,000 worshippers. The local parish priest, Fr. Paulus Dalu Lubur notes that "we have not yet fixed the laying of the first stone. I do not understand the protests because the building has the approval of the local religious leaders, including Muslims". Fr. Benny Susetyo, secretary of the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue in the Indonesian Bishops' Conference, confirms to Fides that the church obtained a building permit on September 11.

Among the population in Tangerang, leaflets of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and other Islamic organizations united in the Islamic forum "Sudimara Pinang" that are opposed to the construction of the church, are circulating. According to the forum, "the church is a threat to Islam, and if the construction of the church continues, Christians will convert Muslims in the coming decades". As Fides learns, the Muslim religious leaders in Tangerang have distanced themselves from this position, stating that "it is wrong to stir up religious tensions" and appeal to tolerance and peaceful religious coexistence, essential trait of Indonesia.

According to Benedict Roger, a Catholic activist, among the responsible of the NGO "Christian Solidarity Worldwide" (CSW), the episode is a wake-up call for religious freedom. Returning from a trip to Indonesia, remembering the attacks suffered by other religious minorities such as Shiites and Ahmadis, Rogers said in a statement sent to Fides: "While many Indonesians remain committed to religious harmony at all levels, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his government are not doing anything to combat intolerance. Not only have they failed to protect religious minorities, but in the last ten years they have introduced laws that violate religious freedom". (PA) (Agenzia Fides 03/10/2013)