



## **ASIA/VIETNAM - More than 60 religious leaders are in prison camps**

Hanoi (Agenzia Fides) - There are 63 among Christian Pastors and other religious leaders detained in deplorable conditions in four prison camps in Vietnam. They are in prison with sentences ranging from 5 to 18 years, and they live in very difficult conditions, subjected to forced labor for 14 hours a day, and with very limited medical care. This is the complaint sent to Fides Agency by the organization "International Christian Concern" (ICC), based in Washington, which monitors religious freedom and the plight of Christians in the world. "Almost all the prisoners – says a report by the ICC sent to Fides - are members of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands of Vietnam". Because of their belonging, "the Christian faithful face a level of discrimination and oppression higher than most of the other Vietnamese".

Fr. Ambrose Nguyen Van Si, OFM, Vietnamese theologian and Rector of the International College of St. Anthony in Rome, interviewed by Fides Agency, believes the figures and the contents of the report of the ICC "are credible": "This is the situation: there are still - explains Fr. Van Si to Fides - clear limitations and restrictions of freedom of expression and conscience: those who have different opinions from those of the government are penalized or sometimes severely punished. This is unpleasant, especially because one hits, with arbitrary arrests, young people who defend human rights. Members of ethnic minorities, collectively known as "Montagnards" (mountain people) pay the consequences, who are still considered a threat to national stability. They are mainly Christian Protestants. I hope for more attention towards these brothers and sisters who suffer and pray".

According to the report of the ICC, government surveillance on religious institutions in the highlands is very strict. Some of the 63 prisoners have probably been in jail since 2004, when the Vietnamese authorities launched a repression on those protesting against the illegal confiscation of land and religious oppression. In the province of Binh Phuoc, local authorities are still insisting to dismantle 116 Christian chapels built by the faithful of the ethnic group "Stieng". These structures legally belong to the "Evangelical Church of South Vietnam", officially registered in the country. The Vietnamese authorities fear that a "separatist and independence" movement develops among minorities. In recent years, hundreds of people were reported and arrested for "threats to national security" or for "illegal activities", we are talking about Protestant Christians, but there are also followers of the Catholic group called "Ha Mon", that venerates the Virgin Mary, although is not regularly included in the local Catholic Church. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 09/10/2013)