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ASIA/INDONESIA - More funds from the government to the Minister for Religious Affairs: appeal to promote harmony

Jakarta (Agenzia Fides) - The Indonesian government has steadily increased over the past five years funds to the Ministry for Religious Affairs, which has increased by 25% per annum since 2008. The trend, say Fides sources in Indonesia, has sparked a public debate, due to the fact that in the same period religious minorities have suffered severe violence, in a growing climate of intolerance. The leaders of the various religious minority communities are asking the government that these funds are to be used to promote religious harmony in the country.
According to data released by the Indonesian Ministry of Finance, the budget of the Ministry of Religious Affairs has increased from 14.9 billion rupees ($ 1.3 billion) - which constituted 5.7% of the total State budget in 2008 - up to 45.4 billion rupees (over U.S. $ 4 billion), a figure that represents 7.3% of the total State budget in 2013. In 2014 the Ministry will receive 49.6 billion rupees.
While some observers believe that the country should spend more to improve its infrastructure or the education field, other commentators underline that the ministry has long been perceived as "corrupt": a special Commission set up to monitor and eradicate corruption in 2011 put it at the top of the list of the most corrupt "institution and government agencies".
The Ministry said they have used the budget "to develop several programs aimed at creating religious harmony in the country" and announced that it has bestowed scholarships to about 8 million Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Christian students belonging to poor and disadvantaged families. The Ministry also allocates a large part of its budget to fund religious education, especially Islamic but also Christian, Buddhist and Hindus in educational institutes, from kindergarten to university. In 2012, the Ministry, in fact, managed 98,379 among schools and Islamic universities. And only 14.9 billion rupees, underline the critics were actually spent on programs to promote religious harmony: as reported to Fides, religious minorities in Indonesia are demanding that a larger slice of the budget is used for programs that promote and protect religious harmony and good relations between the Muslim community and minority communities. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 29/10/2013)

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