



ASIA/MALAYSIA - Use of the word "Allah": UN's appeal to the government, in the name of freedom of expression and religion

Kuala Lumpur (Agenzia Fides) - The Malaysian government should permit the use of the word "Allah" in the columns of the Catholic weekly "Herald" in the name of freedom of expression and religion: says a team of UN observers, with regards to the dispute which saw the Malaysian government and the Catholic Church confronting each other in court. As reported in a note by the UN sent to Fides, Frank La Rue, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression said: "The Ministry of Internal Affairs should immediately take the necessary measures to guarantee the right to freedom of opinion and expression regarding Herald and unconditionally withdraw the controversy on this issue". According to the statement of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the court case, could have "a potential far-reaching impact on religious minorities in Malaysia", restricting freedom of expression and religion. "Freedom of religion or belief is a right of all human beings, not a right granted by the state", remarked Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion. "It cannot be an affair of the state to shape religious traditions, nor the state can claim to be a binding authority in the interpretation of religious sources or in the definition of the dogmas of faith", says Bielefeldt in the note.

According to Rita Izsak, UN expert on minority issues, the ban imposed on Herald "violates the freedom of the local Christian community in the practice of faith" and is worrisome because "it could negatively affect inter-religious relations in the country".

"Discrimination regarding religion or personal belief - says the text sent to Fides - is a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms. In this case it is a blatant violation of the rights of a religious minority community". Last month, the Court of Appeal in Kuala Lumpur, reversing a judgment of first instance, held that it was the legitimate decision of the Ministry of the Interior to prohibit the use of the word in the publication of the weekly "Herald", stating that this term is not "an integral part of the practice of the Christian faith". (PA) (Agenzia Fides 27/11/2013)