

Priest and 2 Laypeople Slain in India

Italian Cardinal Urges Solidarity With Persecuted

MUMBAI, India, SEPT. 23, 2008 (Zenit.org) - As the wave of anti-Christian violence continues in India, two more laypeople were added Monday to the list of victims. A Catholic priest, Father Samuel Francis, was also killed over the weekend, but authorities have not yet ruled out the possibility that his slaying was the result of a robbery, according to AsiaNews.

Attacks continue against churches and Christian centers in the states of Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala. The wave of anti-Christian violence at the hands of Hindu extremists has been heightened since the end of August.

The All India Christian Council reported that in Orissa alone, 37 Christians have already been killed, among them two Protestant pastors; more than 4,000 houses have been burned, and close to 50,000 faithful have fled to camps or sought refuge in the forests.

Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, archbishop of Genoa and president of the Italian episcopal conference, spoke out against these events, denouncing the "anti-Christian persecution taking place in India, Iraq and other parts of the world."

In his address on the occasion of the meeting of the conference's Permanent Council, being held these days in Rome, the cardinal referred especially to the "wave of Christian-phobia" in India. He denounced "contempt for the law, the impunity of the culprits, the disinformation of the press, the embarrassment of local politicians and the silence of the international community."

Cardinal Bagnasco said that "only the voice of the Pope has been raised" against these crimes.

He also mentioned the persecutions being endured in Pakistan, and the "Calvary" of Iraq, where two more Christians were killed in recent days.

Cardinal Bagnasco reminded Christians of their duty to pray and to show their solidarity with those suffering persecution: "In the Church no one is a foreigner; if one member suffers, all members suffer with him."

And the cardinal appealed to politicians, intellectuals and public opinion to again pay "attention to the topic of religious liberty, which is the cornerstone of civilization and of the rights of man, and the guarantee of genuine pluralism and true democracy."

"Religious liberty is not something optional that states grant to the most persistent citizens, or a paternalist concession that harks back to the principle of tolerance," he said. Rather, it is "the bulwark of liberties and ultimate criterion for safeguarding them."

Finally, Cardinal Bagnasco warned there is a risk that so-called Christian-phobia will reach Europe itself as "the practice of relativism, anti-religious and anti-Christian excesses and the ethical and cultural regression of society demonstrate."