

Pakistani Christians and Muslims condemn "cowardly" attack on Peshawar church

by Jibran Khan, AsiaNews.it, 23 September 2013

The President of the Catholic Bishops speaks of "shameful and cowardly" act. Bishop Coutts calls for "special prayers" for the victims and their families, and appeals to Christians "for calm and peace." Muslim leader expresses closeness "to our Christian brothers and sisters." Protests across the country against the massacre, claimed by an Islamist group.



Peshawar (AsiaNews) - The Christian community is still in shock over yesterday's massacre in Peshawar, in northern Pakistan, where two suicide bombers blew themselves up outside a Protestant church causing a hundred dead and over 130 injured, some severe. The condemnation of religious leaders - Catholics, Protestants, Muslims - has been unanimous. They are praying for the victims and their families. A note from the Episcopal Conference (PCBC), signed by the President Msgr. Joseph Coutts - Archbishop of Karachi - expresses "strong condemnation" in the "strongest terms" to what he called an "attack on innocent men, women and children". In cities across the country demonstrations were held to protest against the suicide attack, claimed by the Islamic extremist group Jandullah, already known in the past for attacks against the Shiite minority and the death of nine foreign climbers - on the Himalayas - last June.

Yesterday morning, at the end of Sunday service, two suicide bombers blew themselves up near the Protestant Church of All Saints in Kohati Gate, Peshawar, capital of the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in northern Pakistan. The historic building, built in 1883, echoes the mosques, is facing Mecca and is an iconic building for its attempt to foster peace, harmony and co-existence between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority. At the time of the attack - favored by poor security measures granted by local authorities, even though the building is located in what is considered the "red zone" - there were at least 600 people.

In his message, the president of the Pakistani bishops speaks of a "shameful and cowardly" act and expresses sorrow for the loss of "so many innocent lives" and "solidarity" to the families. The prelate also announced the closure of all Christian educational institutions September 23 to 25 "as a sign of mourning and protest." Archbishop Coutts also calls for "special prayers" for "those who have been martyred and wounded", while launching an appeal to the whole Christian community to "remain calm and avoid violent acts". He turns finally to the government to "take all necessary measures to catch the perpetrators," and urgent measures to "protect the places of worship of religious minorities" against attacks that have reached "alarming proportions".

Solidarity and condemnation is also expressed by other Christian and Muslim leaders. The bishop of Islamabad / Rawalpindi Msgr. Rufin Anthony speaks of "a terrible event" for a country "plagued by terrorism". "Minorities are living in conditions of insecurity because of government policies", adds the prelate, who urged Christians "to protest in a peaceful manner and not cause incidents" at a time when "maximum unity is required." Today, among other things, the activists of APMA - as [announced yesterday by Paul Bhatti to AsiaNews](#) - are holding an impressive (but peaceful) demonstration in Islamabad.

Condolences were also expressed by Maulana Tahir Ashrafi, chairman of the Ulema Council, who emphasizes his closeness "to our Christian brothers and sisters". "It is shameful that the government - adds the Muslim leader - fails to protect minorities in Pakistan,"the Constitution provides "the protection of their rights." "We ask - he concludes - that minorities are protected". Fr. Chand Gill , a priest in Peshawar , whose parish is located not far from the area of the attack speaks of a "devastating" scene. "The wave of violence and terrorism - he adds - is unstoppable".

With a population of over 180 million people (97 per cent Muslim), Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world and the second Muslim nation after Indonesia. Just under 80 per cent are Sunni Muslim, and 20 per cent are Shia. Hindus are around 1.85 per cent; Christians are 1.6 per cent and Sikhs 0.04 per cent. Violence against ethnic or religious minorities is commonplace across the country, especially Christians a favorite target for Islamic fundamentalists. There have been dozens of incidents of violence, including targeted attacks against entire communities - Gojra in 2009 or Joseph Colony Lahore in March last year - or abuses against individuals, often perpetrated under the pretext of blasphemy laws that end up hitting innocent victims (the case of the Christian minor Rimsha Masih).