

August 24, 2010 - Pakistan – Emergency grows, Salesian solidarity becomes more active



(ANS – Quetta) – Recent terrorist attacks risk diverting the world's concern from the emergency in Pakistan. The director of UNICEF has launched an appeal, "Let's hurry up to save the largest possible number of human lives." The Salesians in Quetta are making all possible efforts to welcome and help people displaced.

Bad weather conditions are not giving any relief to Pakistan. The monsoon rains that have devastated the north of the country are now moving southwards, flooding farmland and villages, raising the water levels of the rivers. According to UNICEF, 20% of the country is under water, 900,000 homes have been damaged or completely destroyed, 15.4 million people are affected by the floods, millions of people haven't yet received any help.

Fr. Peter Zago, a Salesian in Quetta, described to Gabriella Ceraso, a journalist from Vatican Radio, the efforts he is making to receive and help those most affected: "This morning we received around 100 families and gave them what is essential at least for a month: flour and oil to cook "chapatti" (their basic meal), some beans, and medicine. We have children, boys and girls, some of who are presenting symptoms of cholera and other diseases due to non-treated drinking water."

In an area where international humanitarian aid has not yet arrived, the Salesian camps are sheltering approximately 1,500 families, with seven to eight children each, a total of 150,000 people. "We have received significant help from Germany and Austria, but we need more in order to reach out to those from Sindh: we have more than 100 families coming from areas as far away as 850 km," says Fr. Zago. "Here the UN is not yet present. We are private institutions at work. We have 80,000 euros, and we are the only ones helping around here, looking after the families that are most in need. Approaching the local merchants, we tell them: 'Look, we are taking care of your Muslim brothers; give us a good discount.' They prepare 50 portions daily for me, containing almost everything, and I don't see anyone else around coming to give any help." Fr. Zago is also aware that when the funds run out he will have to stop the humanitarian help.

Diseases are also a problem. "The north of the country has been hit by cholera. To my knowledge, more than 10,000 have died of cholera, but no one has counted the casualties, nor can they be counted. 25,000 soldiers who could easily give a helping hand are kept in the Swat valley, to stop the Taliban, and therefore there are no personnel to help."

"The human tragedy in Pakistan has reached alarming proportions." This is what Anthony Lake, director of UNICEF, declared. "But the financial constraints limit our capacity to save human lives while the crisis hits harder." Should funds not arrive soon, "more than 3.5 million children will risk falling sick to the various diseases such as dysentery, diarrhea, and cholera."

Today Bishop Joseph Coutts of Faisalabad called for a day of prayer among Catholics, for the approximately 1,500 victims and the more than 20 million refugees.