

March 8, 2010 - India – Salesian Archbishop Malayappan Chinnappa arrested at march for the rights of Christians

(ANS – Chennai) –On Friday, March 5, the Archbishop Malayappan Chinnappa, SDB, of Madras-Mylapore was arrested near Guindy, close to Chennai (Madras), for having taken part in a demonstration in defense of the rights of Christian “Untouchables.” Arrested with him were the Archbishop Peter Fernando of Madurai, Bishop Anthonisamy Neethinathan of Chinglepet, and a number of priests, sisters, and lay Christians.

The Indian police held them for four hours outside Chennai, the capital of the State of Tamil Nadu, at the end of march of 500,000 people, which lasted a month, having started from the city of Kanyakumari, in the south of the country.

Fr. G. Cosmon Arokiaraj, executive secretary of Bishops’ Commission for issues regarding the Indian caste system, told the AsiaNews Agency that the arrests started on Friday morning when the demonstration involving thousands of Christian citizens was joined by a group of the faithful led by Bishop Neethinathan. Informed of what had happened, Archbishop Fernando, and Archbishop Chinnappa went to the place to try to speak with the authorities, but they also were arrested.

The demonstration was being held to draw the attention of the Indian people and of the authorities to the situation of marginalization of which the Christian “untouchables” are victims. The “untouchables,” also know as Dalits, which literally means “trampled upon,” are the members of the lowest castes in traditional Indian society, who lived in segregated neighborhoods and were confined to menial jobs.

In 1950 the Indian government established new programs giving Dalits special preference in education and public employment. But these preferences – originally provided only for Hindu Dalits, then later extended to Sikhs and Buddhists – have never applied to Christians, who account for about 18 million of India’s 27 million Dalits. The protest marchers, including the bishops, were released after being held until the evening.

“We are shocked that this is the way the government is responding to the legitimate democratic struggles of the peace-loving Christian community,” Fr. Arokiaraj commented.