

As rallies continue, Vatican expresses concern about Libya

VATICAN CITY - With pro-democracy movements moving across North Africa and the Middle East, the situation in Libya worries the Vatican because of the loss of human lives, “the targeting of civilians and of peaceful protesters, and the indiscriminate use of force,” a Vatican representative told the U.N. Human Rights Council.

Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Vatican representative to U.N. agencies in Geneva, told the council Feb. 25 that the Vatican supports all efforts to encourage a dialogue between pro-democracy demonstrators and the government of Col. Moammar Gadhafi.

Since late January, demonstrators across the region have taken to the streets calling for democratic reforms; the protests led to leadership changes in Egypt and Tunisia, but saw a violent crackdown in Libya where some 1,000 people were believed to have been killed, foreign workers were being evacuated and about 100,000 people were said to have fled to Egypt and Tunisia.

Archbishop Tomasi told the Human Rights Council, “Violence only leads to a humanitarian catastrophe. Especially vulnerable in this crisis are asylum seekers, refugees and irregular immigrant workers from sub-Saharan Africa, who risk being made a scapegoat of accumulated frustrations.”

Bishop Giovanni Innocenzo Martinelli, apostolic vicar of Tripoli, Libya, said 2,000 Eritreans showed up at a church and church-run facilities Feb. 27 asking for help.

“My heart is breaking because we can’t do anything for them. My thoughts go out

especially to the women and children, who truly are the 'least' the Gospel talks about," Bishop Martinelli told Fides, the news agency of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

The bishop said the church was able to secure seats on a flight to Italy for 54 of the Eritreans who have documents from the U.N. High Commission for Refugees; the others all were hoping to stay inside church properties, "but it's impossible. We are trying to help them anyway we can, helping them pay rent," he said Feb. 28.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, said Feb. 25 that the Vatican obviously was saddened by instances of violence connected to the pro-democracy demonstrations across the region and especially by the extent of the violence in Libya.

In an editorial for the Vatican Television Center, Father Lombardi noted that many observers watching what is happening in North Africa and the Middle East see it "as a possible 'springtime of the Arab world'" as far as democracy goes.

While the encouragement of outsiders is needed, he said, "the Arab peoples' true growth in freedom and democracy must be born from within, without counterproductive external interference."

The world's democracies must offer the region's peoples "friendship and dialogue," he said.

When, on the other side of the Mediterranean basin, "there are numerous young people desiring human growth in greater freedom, we must do everything possible to enter into a positive dialogue with them," he said.

Throughout the Arab world Feb. 25 was marked as a "Day of Anger" with pro-democracy demonstrations.

People took to the streets in several cities in Iraq, mainly because of “the lack of work, the lack of electricity and water,” Chaldean Auxiliary Bishop Shlemon Warduni of Baghdad told Vatican Radio.

“The situation is like this in almost all the Arab nations: what is happening demonstrates how there are many dictators in the world. We hope they can learn something from this situation and decide to give their people more freedom,” he said.

If and when governments change, Bishop Warduni said, the new leaders must act first of all “to defend the good of every citizen” by guaranteeing their rights, ensuring their security and not thinking that “their citizens are slaves.”