

Bishop appeals for peace zone near prominent shrine

BANGALORE, India - With Sri Lankan forces closing in on the Marian shrine of Madhu in northwestern Sri Lanka, Bishop Rayappu Joseph of Mannar, Sri Lanka, has appealed to government forces and the Tamil rebels to leave the area around the shrine a "zone of peace."

"Today as the military operations are taking place very close to the shrine, we are compelled to make an urgent appeal to both the government and the (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) to respect the Madhu shrine and (its) area as a zone of peace," Bishop Joseph said in a written appeal.

Tamil rebels had already moved into the church compound, and Sri Lankan soldiers were very close, the bishop said.

"The situation is really serious, and the shrine could be razed to the ground unless an immediate cease-fire is declared there," Bishop Joseph told Catholic News Service April 1 following his appeal.

Father Emilianuspillai Santhiapillai, the shrine's administrator, told the Asian church news agency UCA News April 1: "The whole of last night, we were awake as heavy fighting continued and shells kept falling close to the church and into the compound. ... This morning again until 11 a.m., we could hear blasts going off."

Father Santhiapillai said it had become so unsafe that the four priests, four nuns and 15 domestic helpers staying with him "made small bunkers in the sacristy so we can shelter ourselves when shells fall."

In his written appeal, Bishop Joseph urged both sides in Sri Lanka's war "to keep away from the area and to ensure that area remains completely and solely under the control of the church" and "to completely desist from using the shrine for their military and political purposes."

The Marian shrine at Madhu is one of the biggest pilgrimage centers in Sri Lanka. In

mid-August, hundreds of thousands of people from across Sri Lanka obtain a special pass from the government to cross over to Madhu, which is under the control of the Tamil rebels.

In January, 18 Catholics were killed and many more injured near the shrine when a bus carrying school students, teachers and others got blasted by a claymore mine hung from a tree.

While the rebels blamed the government's "deep penetration" unit for the mine, the government accused the rebels of being responsible for the blast.

Since 1983, the Tamil rebels have been fighting for autonomy for ethnic majority Tamil areas in the north and east of Sri Lanka.