

Bishop criticized for remarks about release of troops

LONDON – The head of Great Britain’s military diocese has come under fire from politicians, military leaders and the media after he welcomed Iran’s release of 15 sailors and marines as religiously motivated “good deeds.”

Bishop Thomas Burns of the Bishopric of the Forces was called naive, accused of wishful thinking and was the subject of several critical newspaper editorials.

Meanwhile, the Vatican said Pope Benedict XVI had sent a written appeal to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, urging the release of the 14 men and one woman captured by Iran in contested waters March 23.

An informed Vatican source said that in an effort to quell increasing international tensions over the crew’s seizure Pope Benedict sent the letter for “exclusively humanitarian” reasons. The Vatican would provide no details on the contents of the letter or when it was sent.

Bishop Burns, who earlier had appealed for the release of the service personnel, said April 4 that the decision by the Iranian government to free them was “not just as the result of diplomacy,” but was “an act of mercy” in accordance with Islam. His comments came after Iran’s announcement that the hostages would be freed and a day before they were handed over to the British Embassy and flown home.

“Faith in a forgiving God has been exemplified in action by their good deeds,” the bishop said of the Iranians April 4.

Liam Fox, defense spokesman for the Conservative Party, criticized the bishops’ comments as “naive in the extreme.”

“This is a regime that illegally captured our servicemen and held them in quite dreadful conditions for some time,” Fox, a Catholic, told the London-based Daily Telegraph April 9.

The Daily Telegraph asked in an editorial the same day: “Is it an act of mercy to stage a nasty little charade in which you release people you have kidnapped? And could not the bishop have found room in his statement for one word of criticism of a regime that sponsors acts of terrorism against young British men and women?”

The Sunday Times of London asked in an April 8 editorial, “Can anybody seriously believe that the Iranian president, having milked the seizure of British forces for all it was worth, has a higher moral authority because he makes a couple of religious references?”

Col. Edward Armistead, a former officer in the British army’s Coldstream Guards and member of the Church of England’s General Synod, said Bishop Burns was “guilty of wishful thinking.”

Bishop Burns told Catholic News Service April 10, “I am disappointed that quotes taken from statements issued before the release of the captives were taken out of context and misconstrued in media reports this week.

“My role as Catholic bishop for the armed forces is to offer pastoral support to those serving in the forces and their families,” he added. “I want to emphasize that all of my comments were to encourage the safe release of the 15 service personnel from Iran. We should give thanks that they have returned safely to their families in the U.K.”

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Contributing to this story was Carol Glatz at the Vatican.