

Church leaders to go ahead with dedication

WARSAW, Poland – Church leaders have vowed to press ahead with the dedication of a Catholic church in Azerbaijan a week after it was damaged by attackers.

“The opening will undoubtedly take place – there’ve been no changes in our program,” said Father Rolandas Makrickas, an official at the Vatican’s Tbilisi-based nunciature.

The newly completed Immaculate Conception Church in Baku was damaged April 10 by fire after explosives were hurled through its windows.

“The damage caused by this vandalism wasn’t too extensive, and we see no particular danger to the Catholic community here,” Father Makrickas told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview April 18.

Vatican officials, government representatives and Muslim and Orthodox leaders from the country are expected to attend the dedication Mass April 29.

The head of the church’s mission in Azerbaijan, Salesian Father Jan Capla, told CNS April 18 that the attack on the church was the first anti-Catholic incident during his five years in Azerbaijan.

“The police are working to identify and establish the motives of those responsible,” he said. “In the meantime, the situation is normal, and our small Catholic community faces no particular threats.”

Father Capla told Azerbaijan’s Turan news agency the day after the fire that the country’s State Committee for Cooperation With Religious Organizations had “reacted quickly” by ordering a police investigation.

“Since the church hasn’t been officially opened it isn’t well guarded, so it wasn’t difficult to set it alight,” Father Capla said. “There are criminals in every country, so we shouldn’t blow this event out of proportion.”

Catholics make up just 400 of the more than 8 million inhabitants of Azerbaijan; most are Muslim.