Eastern Europeans discuss communist collaboration

WARSAW, Poland – Many Eastern European church officials said they lack procedures for handling claims of clergy collaborating with communist secret police nearly 20 year after the collapse of communism.

Father Laszlo Nemeth, secretary-general of the Hungarian bishops' conference, told Catholic News Service that although Hungarian bishops had debated the issue in the early 1990s the communist police archives are still closed to researchers.

"We'd like to see government legislation on the use and interpretation of communist regime archives, but our MPs (members of Parliament) appear unready to pass a law which would allow objective research in this complex area," Father Nemeth said Jan. 25. "Some files and documents were destroyed and some fabricated. If we can't establish the truth from them, how can we properly screen our clergy?"

The priest said most bishops consecrated under communist rule had now retired, and younger Catholic clergy were uninvolved.

"Everyone who achieved something, knew languages or reached a certain level of importance in society was controlled and asked to collaborate," he said. "Many of those who made compromises, seeing this as a lesser evil, later achieved wonderful things for the church. So there's an uneasiness about dragging this all out into the open again."

In Romania, Father Francisc Dubos, a spokesman for the Bucharest Archdiocese, said Romanian President Traian Basescu had urged the opening of secret police files on Orthodox and Catholic clergy after the justice minister called for clergy guilty of working with communists to be named publicly last year.

Romanian church leaders believed the demands were "politically motivated" and they had not adopted an "official position," Father Dubos told CNS.

"Although diocesan bishops have talked privately about how to deal with

collaboration claims, there are no church statements or guidelines," he said.

"Some priests were clearly involved with the authorities, so a case like Poland's could occur here too," he added, referring to the recent resignation of Warsaw Archbishop Stanislaw Wielgus – and subsequently other Polish clergy – for working with the communist secret police.

Since Archbishop Wielgus' resignation, dozens of Polish dioceses have set up individual or joint commissions to investigate communist-era surveillance of local priests, in line with recommendations announced at an emergency Polish bishops' conference meeting Jan. 12. The bishops also announced the creation of a five-member central Church Historical Commission that would be available if requested to check the files of bishops.

The diocesan commissions are composed almost entirely of priests and bishops. In the Warsaw archdiocesan commission, only one of the 12 commission members is a layperson.

Father Dubos said he doubted such claims of clergy collaboration would have "the same impact" in Romania as in Poland because of the Catholic Church's minority status.

"Politically motivated campaigns like this won't radically affect public trust," he added. "Nor will media revelations generate a hysterical reaction."

Many bishops' conferences around Eastern Europe have tried to identify clergy who worked with the communist secret police.

The Lithuanian bishops' conference urged guilty priests to come forward in 2000. And in Slovakia last year, several dozen Catholic priests were named on lists of alleged communist agents by government officials.

The Slovakian bishops' conference asked forgiveness from those harmed by clergy collaborators in a March 2005 statement. The bishops said the church would require an "explanation and atonement" from those involved.

In the Czech Republic, three church leaders, including the president of the bishops'

conference, Archbishop Jan Graubner of Olomouc, were named by newspapers in December as former secret police informers. This fueled media claims that dozens of Catholic clergy could face exposure if more archival research was available.

Meanwhile, in Russia, Father Igor Kovalevsky, the secretary-general of the Russian bishops' conference, said clergy collaboration had not been debated in the country, since 90 percent of the Catholic Church's 270 priests are from abroad.

"Unlike in Poland, the Catholic Church (in Russia) lived for eight decades under an atheist totalitarian regime here, which was severely hostile to the church, so lustration and penance really aren't necessary here" he told CNS Jan. 25.

Fulfilling obligations toward one's nation doesn't mean collaborating with its regime – this would be a very superficial conclusion," he said.