

Pope condemns latest attacks on Christian churches in Iraq

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI condemned the latest attacks on Christian churches in Iraq and urged a return to peaceful coexistence among the country's diverse groups.

The pope's comments came Jan. 10 in a telegram addressed to Iraqi Cardinal Emmanuel-Karim Delly of Baghdad, the Chaldean patriarch. It was sent in the pope's name and signed by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state.

Six churches and three other church-run institutions were damaged and several people injured in bomb attacks over the previous five days in Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk.

The pope expressed his spiritual closeness to those injured and his solidarity with religious superiors of the church institutions, as well as all Iraqi Christians.

"Mindful that such attacks are also directed against the whole people of Iraq, His Holiness appeals to the perpetrators to renounce the ways of violence, which have caused so much suffering to the civilian population," the telegram said.

"He encourages all those in authority to renew efforts toward peaceful negotiation aimed at a just resolution of the country's difficulties, respectful of the rights of all," it said.

The pope "commends all the people of Iraq to the heavenly protection of our almighty and merciful Father," it said.

The text of the telegram was published by the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano.

Two separate car bombs exploded outside two Christian churches in the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk Jan. 9; it was the latest in a series of attacks against churches in Iraq.

The British news agency Reuters reported that police said three people were wounded in the Jan. 9 attacks in central and northern Kirkuk. A source confirmed the violence in an e-mail to Catholic News Service.

Church officials reported Jan. 6 that bombs had damaged at least four churches and other church buildings in Baghdad and Mosul. Several people were reported injured in those attacks.

In a residential neighborhood of Mosul, a written warning from Islamic terrorists was found Jan. 10 on the wall of Holy Spirit Catholic Church, warning Christians not to go to the church and urging them to leave the country, said a church official who works closely with Christians in Iraq. Last year, Father Ragheed Aziz Ganni and three subdeacons were killed by militants in front of the same church.

The church official said that the day before the Jan. 6 attacks, a letter distributed to Christians in Mosul warned that if they did not convert to Islam and leave their homes “all of you will be slaughtered in three days.” The church official obtained the letter, signed by an al-Qaida group, from the Assyrian Patriotic Party, a political party in Iraq representing ethnic Assyrians.

The letter concluded with a well-known Arabic phrase, “who warns is not to be blamed,” the official said.

Violence against Christians since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq has forced many Christians to leave the country and seek refuge in neighboring countries. More than 1.2 million Christians lived in Iraq before the war. Compared to the prewar percentage of Christians in Iraq, a disproportionate number of all Iraqi refugees are Christian, according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

Contributing to this story was Regina Linskey in Washington.