

Pope tells new diplomats human rights needed for lasting peace

VATICAN CITY – Respect for human rights, negotiated settlements to conflicts and improved education are essential ingredients for consolidating peace and promoting development, Pope Benedict XVI told nine new ambassadors to the Vatican.

The pope May 29 welcomed new ambassadors from Tanzania, Uganda, Liberia, Chad, Bangladesh, Belarus, Guinea, Sri Lanka and Nigeria.

In addition to making a brief speech to the entire group, Pope Benedict handed each ambassador a message addressed to that country.

In his message to Sri Lankan Ambassador Tikiri Bandara Maduwegedera, the pope asked the government to ensure that its new commission for investigating claims of human rights abuses works seriously and quickly “so that the truth about all of these cases may come to light.”

The pope expressed particular concern about Father Thiruchelvam Nihal Jim Brown and his assistant, “whose whereabouts are still unknown, almost two years after their disappearance.”

The priest and his assistant were last seen returning to the small island of Allaipiddy off the Jaffna peninsula in August 2006. They had gone to inspect the parish church, which had been damaged by shelling, allegedly by government troops. Some 20 people were killed during the attack, and the priest led the rest of Allaipiddy’s population off the island over the objections of the Sri Lankan navy.

Tens of thousands of people have been killed and more than 1 million have been displaced since 1983 when fighting began between government troops and Tamil rebels demanding autonomy for areas in northern and eastern Sri Lanka.

Pope Benedict told the ambassador, “Initiatives aimed at achieving peace need to be rooted in a proper understanding of the human person and the inviolability of his or her innate rights.”

While affirming that “acts of terrorism” and “arbitrary attacks” are never justifiable, the pope said “the struggle against terrorism must always be carried out with respect for human rights and the rule of law.”

The ambassador told the pope that the government was engaged in “limited military action” against the rebels and he claimed the rebels were recruiting children to fight.

The pope said “such practices must be condemned” because they leave “scars that last a lifetime” and damage the entire society.

“I implore leaders in your country and throughout the world to remain vigilant so that no compromise will be made in this regard,” he said.

In each of his messages, the pope emphasized the importance of improving education for all children, both to promote economic development and to ensure the young learn the moral and social values that their countries need to solidify democracy.

He told Liberia’s ambassador, Wesley Momo Johnson, that running schools is one of the most important contributions the Catholic Church is making in the country, which is still recovering from civil war.

“Many of your children and young people have been traumatized by the experience of war, some of them forced to become soldiers and to abandon their education, resulting in low levels of literacy across the population,” he said.

“The church in such circumstances seeks to offer the people hope, to give them faith in the future and to show them that they are loved and cared for,” the pope said.

In his message to the ambassador from Bangladesh, Pope Benedict said, “A vibrant educational system is essential to strong democracies.”

He told the ambassador, Debapriya Bhattacharya, “Both the state and the church have respective roles in helping families impart wisdom, knowledge and moral virtue to their children so that they will come to recognize the dignity common to all men and women, including those belonging to cultures and religions different from their

own.”

The pope added that because faith-based schools perform a public service they should receive “the support they need, including financial assistance.”