

Vatican adds two anti-terrorism units, says security director

VATICAN CITY - The Vatican has set up two new anti-terrorism units that will work closely with international police experts to prevent possible attacks, the Vatican's director of security announced.

A "rapid-intervention group" and an "anti-sabotage department" were recently established as subunits of the Vatican's gendarme corps, Domenico Giania, corps director, told the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano June 7.

He said the Vatican also has begun closer collaboration with Interpol, the International Criminal Police Organization.

The Vatican and Pope Benedict XVI have been named as potential targets by extremist groups in recent years. Earlier this year, an al-Qaida leader accused the pope of leading an anti-Islam campaign.

Although the Vatican has downplayed the threats, it also has beefed up security, adding metal-detectors for all visitors to St. Peter's Basilica and attendees at papal events. The gendarme corps also has been deployed at Vatican territories outside Vatican City, in particular at Rome's patriarchal basilicas.

Director Giania said the rapid-intervention group would use new channels and resources to identify high-risk situations and prepare immediate action to neutralize possible threats.

The anti-sabotage unit is specially trained to identify and react to suspicious packages or objects, he said. It also has a supplementary role in other investigations, he said.

Director Giania pointed out that the Vatican stepped up its anti-terrorism measures during Holy Year 2000, when a technologically updated command center was inaugurated. The center runs 24 hours a day, every day of the year, and is connected with a network of surveillance cameras throughout the 109-acre Vatican City.

The gendarme corps, which has about 130 members, works in close collaboration with the Swiss Guards, especially during events involving the pope.

Director Giania said the new cooperative arrangement with Interpol marked a big step forward for Vatican security, because it gives the Vatican access to a large data bank of suspects, the latest information on criminal or subversive organizations, and information on the latest anti-terrorism operational procedures.