

World & Nation

Diverted flight puts spotlight on South African tensions

By John Thavis

Maseru, Lesotho (NC) — By every reckoning, September 14 ranked as the strangest day in Pope John Paul II's 10 years of international traveling, and it ended with a tragic postscript.

As one of 70 foreign journalists on the papal trip, I shared his aborted air flight to Lesotho and his unscheduled overland odyssey through South Africa. When our paths finally diverged that night in Maseru, Lesotho's capital, our press bus passed near the site where gunmen were holding a busload of 71 Catholic pilgrims. A minute later, a shootout began, leaving four dead and 11 wounded.

Like the pope, those of us on the bus found out about the killings afterward, at the end of a day that had begun normally at a departure ceremony in Botswana.

We had reached the midpoint of a 10-day swing through southern Africa, and the clear weather had suddenly turned cloudy. Even as our Air Zimbabwe 707 took off, we were told that storms at Maseru had cut off communications with the airport there. It was a white-knuckle flight, the plane lurching through heavy clouds on its landing approach at Maseru, which lies in a bowl surrounded by high buttes.

When the flaps were lowered for landing and still no land was visible below, we watched Vatican officials hurry to the cockpit for some fast consulting. The airport's navigation beacons and radar signals were out, the pilot told them, and with clouds at 800 feet, a landing would be too risky.

Since the aircraft was low on fuel, returning to Botswana now would also be chancy. A few minutes later, a beaming stewardess walked through our press section and said loudly, "Jo-burg." A cheer of relief went up: we were headed for Johannesburg, South Africa.

The pope, sitting in the forward cabin, took the news in good humor. "That wasn't on the schedule," he remarked with a smile. He joked that, in a speech prepared for delivery later that day, he was to have promised South Africans a visit "in the not too distant future."

We journalists were gleefully pointing to our advance copies of the talk as evidence of papal premonition. Suddenly, the country that had been excluded from this five-nation visit was about to occupy its center stage. It was the first time the pope's plane had been diverted to another country during a papal trip.

When we landed at Johannesburg's Jan

Smuts International Airport some 50 minutes later, armed guards surrounded the plane — some facing in and some facing out. An airport manager greeted a Vatican protocol official at the bottom of the landing stairs, and we learned that the country's foreign minister, Roelof "Pik" Botha, was on his way to meet with the pope. South Africa's 81-year-old retired Cardinal Owen McCann of Cape Town, who has yearned for a papal trip, was already on board.

From the air, the Vatican's first call had gone to Johannesburg Archbishop Reginald J. Orsmond, who now joined the group. When Botha arrived, he boarded the plane and brought the pope into a room of the airport terminal. The pope did not stop to kiss the ground, a customary gesture on first-time pastoral visits.

We journalists were led to a waiting room with two telephones, no local coins and heavily armed policemen at every door. Like the pope, we were technically in a bureaucratic limbo — but that problem was about to disappear in a show of hospitality and police protection from our surprised hosts.

I spoke with Vatican officials who were busy considering the alternatives: try flying to Maseru again; take a train, or take up South Africa's offer of a police motorcade.

Eventually they chose the five-hour, 250-mile motorcade.

As we were led to two press buses, I noticed machine guns lying on the seats of the South African security cars that would escort us to Lesotho. The back seat was full of extra clips. Our caravan, led by the pope in a bulletproof BMW, picked up more vehicles along the way, and eventually included some 25 police cars, several ambulances and a helicopter.

A few hundred feet ahead of us, Pope John Paul sat in the back of his car, reading and catching a candid glimpse of the countryside. Through the car window, the nation run by a white-minority government must have looked very black.

At every turn, security patrols blocked off traffic and stood with machine guns at intersections. We passed a semi-trailer truck that had just overturned in the confusion, spilling vegetables all over the highway.

As we neared Maseru, we followed the unfolding hijacking drama by radio. The gunmen were holding eight nuns, 36 schoolchildren and other pilgrims on their way to see the pope. The terrorists were now demanding to meet with the pope when he arrived in the city — but the pope was not told about the demand until late that night, his press spokesman said.



Pope John Paul II gives Communion to a boy during a September 12 Mass at the Ascot Racecourse in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. UPI-Reuters/NC News

We crossed the tiny bridge marking the Lesotho border, and watched as an emblematic scene was enacted: the pope was greeted by Lesotho's leader, Maj. Gen. Justin Lekhanya, under the protective watch of South African security officers.

Pope John Paul walked along a muddy roadside to shake hands with some of the many pilgrims who had lined the street leading into the city, after camping out in tent cities along the outskirts.

Then our motorcade wound through the city, passing a few blocks away from where

the bus hijackers and a South African SWAT team continued their standoff.

The pope's car continued on to Roma, a village some 15 miles away. Our bus backtracked, again passing near the hijacking scene on the way to our hotel press center.

According to photographers at the scene, the shooting began about one minute after our bus passed by. Three of the gunmen and a 16-year-old schoolgirl were killed, and the injured were quickly moved to hospitals in a scream of sirens.

Papal trip

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Catholic schoolteacher Mabokang Ramokoena, said, "We never thought we would be here to see him. God helped us to escape, we don't know how."

Pope John Paul said he was "saddened to learn that others on their way to join me in this pilgrimage have been the victims of a hijack that caused such anguish and ended in bloodshed."

After a Mass in which he beatified 19th century missionary Queen Elizabeth II Hospital to visit the passengers wounded in the hijacking and give them rosaries.

At a meeting with youths later in the day, the pope said it is not cowardly to spurn violence as a means of solving problems.

"There is nothing passive about non-violence," he said. "The increase of violence in the world can never be halted by responding with more of the same."

On a brief visit to the kingdom of Swaziland September 16, the pope struck a different theme, but one he has sounded

previously in Africa — Christians cannot be polygamists.

Among those listening to his sermon at a stadium in Manzini, Swaziland's capital, was the country's 20-year-old king, Mswati III — who has four wives and was becoming engaged to another woman.

The basis of stable families is a "monogamous marital union" founded on the "equal personal dignity" of men and women, Pope John Paul said.

After less than a day in Swaziland, the pope traveled to Mozambique, a country wracked by a long and destructive civil war. Mozambique's bishops have called on the

Marxist government and the opposing Mozambican National Resistance to negotiate an end to the conflict.

The pope ended his visit to Mozambique, and his southern Africa trip, with an appeal for peace.

In a speech to the bishops, he addressed "from the bottom of my heart to all those involved in one way or another in this (civil) war," and urged them to "stop the killings."

At a Mass in Maputo, the capital, the same day, he said a clear political program based on dialogue is urgently needed.

"Peace either involves everyone, or it involves no one," the pope said.

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