

Archbishop: War risks outbreak of fanaticism

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

ROME — Jordan's Melkite Catholic archbishop said the gulf war risks igniting religious fanaticism in the Middle East, with serious consequences for moderate Arabs.

Christians and Muslims in Jordan are following the fighting "with anguish and fear," Archbishop Saba Youakim of Petra and Philadelphia said in a telephone interview Jan. 19.

The archbishop, who lives in the Jordanian capital of Amman — which during Roman occupation was named Philadelphia — said that for the first three days of the war "the streets here were deserted and the people were home next to their radios."

"We don't know what's coming next," he said.

Jordan's King Hussein has tilted toward Iraq in the gulf crisis and condemned the U.S.-led bombing that began Jan. 17 (Jan. 16 in the United States), but has said Jordan will remain neutral in the war. Popular sentiment in Jordan, however, was said to be shifting strongly in favor of Iraq. Jordan, which has a large Palestinian population, is located between Israel and Iraq.

Archbishop Youakim praised King Hussein and said he hoped religion would not become a factor in the war.

"Fortunately we have a very prudent

king who has made many efforts to prevent war. But there are extremists. It is possible that fanaticism can make big problems here," he said.

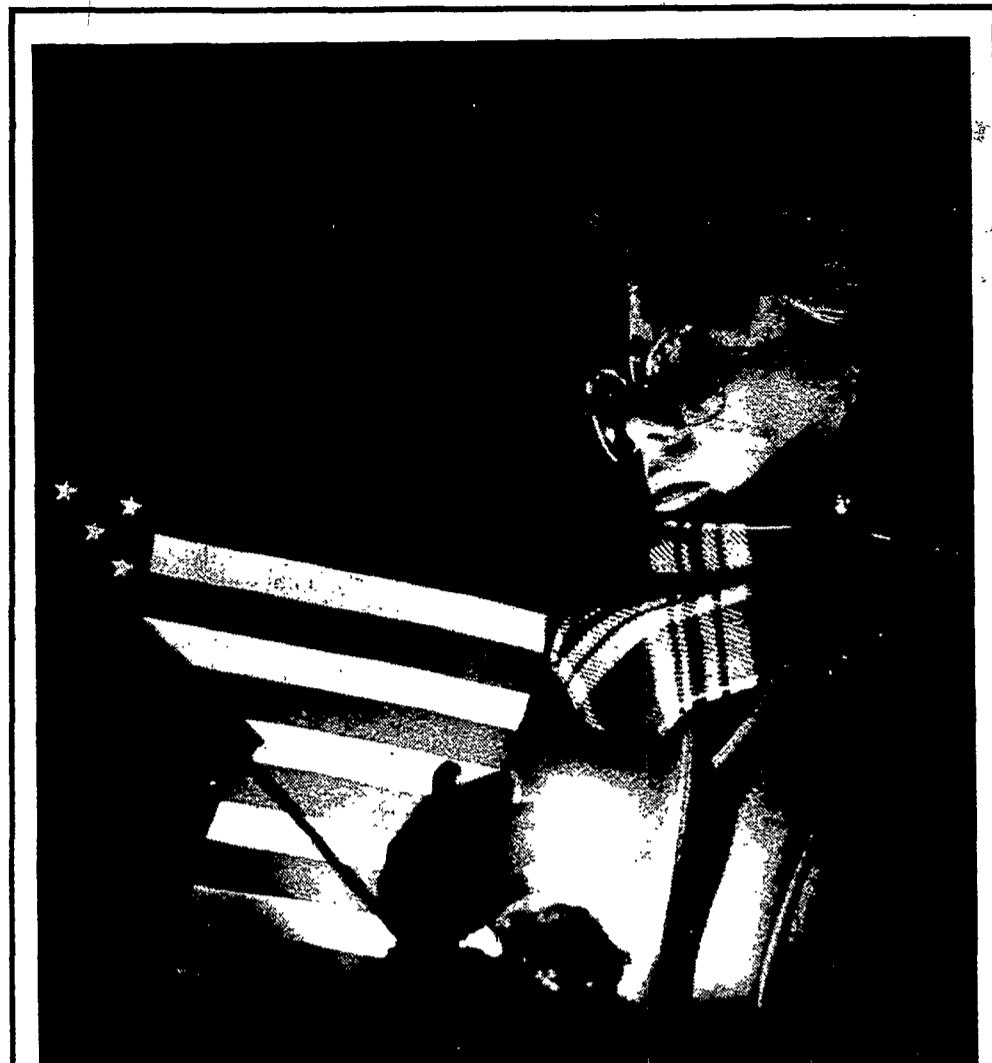
The archbishop said he was gratified that local Muslim preachers have so far been "very prudent" in their talks about the conflict. But if Israel is drawn into the war, he said, "people would come to see this as a war against Muslims," and religious fundamentalism could become a big factor.

"This is the danger," he said.

On Jan. 18 Iraq launched missile attacks on Israel, injuring 30 people. Israel is not part of the multinational force facing Iraq, and the Iraqi attacks appeared to be a deliberate attempt to draw the Jewish state into the fighting, Archbishop Youakim said.

He said the church, like the government, supports a neutral course on the war, which he called "a catastrophe for everyone." He said, however, that an international peace conference should be called to deal with all the problems of the Middle East, including those of Palestinians.

Iraq has insisted on linking such a conference to negotiations over the future status of Kuwait, which it invaded last August. Most western leaders have refused to link the two issues, demanding an unconditional Iraqi withdrawal.



AP/Wide World Photos
PRAYER VIGIL — During a Jan. 16 candlelight vigil in Denton, Texas, Norma Nelson prays for her son, Lt. Sam Nelson, a U.S. Marine on active duty in the Persian Gulf.

Prelate compares Mikhail Gorbachev to Pontius Pilate

MILAN, Italy (CNS) — A Lithuanian archbishop said Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev acted like Pontius Pilate when he disclaimed responsibility for a bloody Soviet army crackdown in the Baltic republic.

"The answers given by Soviet authorities about the bloodshed in Vilnius are very evasive. The defense minister says he never gave the order to fire on the crowd, and Gorbachev even claims he knew

nothing about it," said Archbishop Julijonas Steponavicius of Vilnius.

Gorbachev and the others are like Pontius Pilate, he said, because "we are mourning our dead, and they are washing their hands of it."

The archbishop's comments came in an interview published Jan. 19 by the Italian Catholic daily, *Avvenire*. They came a week after a Soviet Army assault on a broadcasting station in Vilnius left 14 people dead.

Meanwhile, five people were reportedly killed Jan. 20 in the neighboring republic of Latvia, when Soviet troops exchanged gunfire with loyalist police at the Latvian Interior Ministry. The Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia declared their independence from the Soviet Union last year.

Archbishop Steponavicius said he thought the recent Baltic events showed the Soviet Union was "headed toward dictatorship."

He said Lithuania had shown flexibility

in suspending its declaration of independence so that talks with Moscow could begin last year. But the Kremlin only wanted to deal with "a committee composed of communists and Russians," and not with the legitimately elected Lithuanian leaders, he said.

"The church stands with the nation and with the democratically elected Parliament that is now threatened with aggression," the archbishop said.

Archbishop Steponavicius was not optimistic for Lithuania's short-term prospects, however. The republic's push for independence will probably end like that of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, he said. In both countries, Soviet troops put down the revolt and installed friendly regimes.

In Lithuania, Moscow now "needs only to decide how to take power. The blood of innocents has already been spilled. We are praying that there be no more victims," he said.

"Unfortunately, the West notices us only after a massacre, when it's too late," he added.



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