

Gandhi assassination shocks the world



AP/Wide World Photos

The coffin holding the body of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi is carried down the steps of an Air Force Boeing 737 at New Delhi Airport May 22. Gandhi was assassinated at an election rally in South India May 21.

NEW DELHI, India (CNS) — Condemning the "dastardly" assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, an Indian church official said the dangerous trend of settling political scores through violence is a threat to democracy and the country.

Gandhi and at least 14 others were killed when a bomb exploded at an election rally 30 miles from Madras, the capital of India's southern Tamil Nadu state, May 21. The bomb exploded at 10:20 p.m., decapitating Gandhi with its blast.

Gandhi, 46, had arrived at the Madras airport two hours earlier to campaign for his Congress Party, which most opinion polls had predicted would win a majority in the elections, said UCA News, an Asian church news agency based in Hong Kong.

Gandhi's Italian- and Catholic-born widow, Sonia, was elected May 22 by Congress Party officials to succeed him as its leader, but she later turned down the

party's offer.

Calling the assassination "a blow to the Indian polity," Father Lucio Da Veiga Coutinho, deputy secretary general of the Indian bishops' conference, said the country "has lost a great leader and sagacious politician."

Indian bishops have been shocked at the violence that has accompanied the present election campaign, Father Coutinho said.

All should join to eradicate the "dangerous trend," he added.

No group claimed responsibility for Gandhi's assassination. However, most of the violence in Tamil Nadu has been attributed to Tamil militants from neighboring Sri Lanka who have taken refuge in the state.

Gandhi was also reportedly on the target list of Sikh terrorists fighting for an independent nation in Punjab, northern India. Sikh terrorists have not been known to operate in Tamil Nadu, agency reports

said.

Gandhi's political career has been marked by tragedy. He first became prime minister soon after the assassination of his mother, Indira Gandhi, who was shot by her Sikh bodyguards Oct. 31, 1984.

His political career began in 1981 after his younger brother Sanjay — considered Indira Gandhi's political heir — was killed in a plane crash.

A grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister after independence from British rule in 1947, Rajiv Gandhi was born Aug. 20, 1944, in Bombay, India. An airline pilot by profession, he and his wife had two children.

India's general elections for the lower house of parliament have been marred by unprecedented violence despite the presence of a record 1.5 million police and 630 companies of paramilitary forces deployed to ensure "free, fair and peaceful" balloting.

More than 200 persons have been killed in election and campaign violence. Voting scheduled for May 23 and 26 was postponed to June 12 and 15 following Gandhi's death.

Congress and Communist party leaders have blamed the violence on the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party, which has based its campaign on an appeal to Hindu pride.

Bharatiya Janata has pledged to build a temple to the Hindu god Ram at the site of a 16th-century mosque at Ayodhya, northern India.

Pro-life

Continued from page 4

briefs in the case were the U.S. Catholic Conference; the National Right to Life Committee; 55 pro-life members of Congress; the Knights of Columbus; Feminists for Life of America and the American Association of Pro-Life Obstetricians and Gynecologists; and a coalition of religious pro-life organizations including Catholics United for Life.

Catholic and pro-life leaders hailed the decision as a "victory for pro-life" and a defeat for those who support government funding of abortions.

Helen Alvare, the U.S. bishops' spokeswoman on pro-life matters, said the decision reflected points raised by the U.S. Catholic Conference in its friend-of-the-court brief in the case.

"These are the exact points we made in our brief," she said after reading a news report on the decision. "We said that the government can legitimately choose to favor childbearing over abortion and here the court is relying on that principle."

Alvare made the comments in Phoenix, where she was addressing a workshop at the annual convention of the Catholic Press Association.

Mark E. Chopko, USCC general counsel, said the conference agreed with the court's ruling that the government Title X regulations did not unconstitutionally restrain "legitimate liberties."

"The rules only made clear that abortion was always outside the scope of a Title X program," he said. "There is simply no constitutional requirement that Congress subsidize abortion."

Bishop James T. McHugh of Camden, N.J., former head of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, described the decision as "positive and encouraging."

"Clearly, the decision today is consistent with congressional intent and with

the thinking of the American people," he said. "Refusal of government funding for the promotion of abortion is not a violation of free speech or a woman's decision to obtain an abortion. It simply safeguards the rights of those who do not want to be compelled to pay for abortions by tax-supported government programs."

The decision also drew immediate reaction from supporters of abortion rights.

Kate Michelman, head of the National Abortion Rights Action League, said the

ruling was "an enormous shock, far worse even than we feared, and undeniable evidence that the chill wind blowing from this court threatens our most fundamental, inalienable rights and liberties."

In Congress Reps. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and John Porter, R-Ill., announced plans May 23 to introduce legislation to overturn the decision.

Contributing to this story was Patricia Zapor in Phoenix.

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