

Leaders express shock over sisters' deaths

By Carol Zimmermann
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Bishop James P. Keleher of Belleville, Ill., scheduled a memorial Mass as religious, civic and diplomatic leaders sent messages of sympathy over the killing of five American sisters in the Liberian war.

The slain sisters were from the order of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ based in Ruma, Ill., in the Belleville diocese. In the early hours of Oct. 31 the congregation received word of the sisters' deaths from the Society of the Missionaries in Africa. The news was confirmed a few hours later by the U.S. State Department.

Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles, Bishop Daniel L. Ryan of Springfield, Ill., and Mayor Raymond Flynn of Boston were among those expressing condolences.

A cable message from William Twaddell, U.S. ambassador to Liberia, said the slain sisters had been "acting in the most noble tradition of their order and their faith. The safety and welfare of the wounded and the defenseless motivated them and were their only concerns in the midst of war."

He assured the congregation that every attempt to recover the bodies of the sisters would be made.

But Sister Frances Schumer, spokeswoman for the order, told Catholic News Service Nov. 2 that information was still sketchy on the remains.

"They have still not been able to locate them," she said.

Four Liberian novices living with

the American sisters were also reported killed, but these women have not yet been identified, according to Sister Schumer.

"There is some discrepancy," she said. "We don't know who's alive and who's dead."

The American sisters are identified as Sister Shirley Kolmer, 61, Sister Kathleen McGuire, 54, Sister Agnes Mueller, 62, Sister Mary Joel Kolmer, 58 and Sister Barbara Ann Muttra, 69.

The sisters had each been in Liberia for several years working as teachers and nurses in a high school in Monrovia. Sister Muttra had been there since the order began sending missionaries to the country in 1971.

During a press conference, Sister Mildred Gross, provincial of the Ruma province of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, said the last contact they had with the slain nuns was on Oct. 2 when Sisters Kolmer and Muttra made their usual monthly call home.

"They indicated that the situation in the country was tense but had no reason to fear for their safety," she said.

On Oct. 15, the sisters in Illinois sent a message via shortwave radio to the sisters in Liberia telling them they were thinking of them and supporting them with prayers.

Sister Gross said the sisters were shocked by the tragic news. "We are consoled by the knowledge that these women wanted to be in Liberia and to share in the suffering of the people," she added.

In a telephone interview with Catho-

lic News Service, Sister Schumer said the order has not yet decided if it will send more missionaries to Liberia.

"It is important to retain our contacts," she said. "We do not blame the Liberian people for this."

Archbishop Michael Francis of Monrovia, who accused the Liberian rebels for the sisters' deaths, was planning to celebrate a memorial Mass on Nov. 2. In a letter to the congregation, he described the slain nuns as "a source of inspiration, dedication and commitment in whatever way they serve the Master. Like the Master they gave up their life for their fellow persons."

Bishop Ryan said the news of the sisters' deaths "causes great sorrow for me and, I am sure, for all people of good will."

He said the news was "all the more

poignant" because it was announced on the eve of the Feast of All Saints, "when the church celebrates the witness of the saints to the power of Jesus' transforming, life-giving death and resurrection."

Bishop Ryan is attempting to establish contact with Archbishop Michael Francis of Monrovia. On the day the deaths were announced he visited Mary Sabo, the sister of Sister Barbara Ann Muttra.

Cardinal Mahony said, "the entire world is in disbelief that any armed forces, regardless of motives or goals, would attack and murder five American sisters whose only concern had been reaching out in the name of Christ to the least of our brothers and sisters."

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Pope prays for peace in Liberia

Prays that killings will spark renewed efforts

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II prayed that the deaths of five U.S. women religious in Liberia would be a catalyst for peace in the war-battered West African nation.

After praying the Angelus Nov. 1, the pope told a crowd in St. Peter's Square that the sisters were "brutally murdered" outside Monrovia, the Liberian capital, "where they dedicated their lives to announcing the Gospel and serving their brothers and sisters."

Four Liberian novices living with

the Americans were also reported killed. Archbishop Michael Francis of Monrovia said that the report is unconfirmed — although three novices are missing.

The archbishop blamed the deaths on rebel troops, but Charles Taylor, head of the rebel National Patriotic Front of Liberia, denied responsibility.

The five slain Illinois natives, all members of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ attached to the order's convent in Red Bud, Ill., were: first cousins Sisters Joel and Shirley Kolmer, 58 and 61 respectively, of Waterloo; Sister Agnes Mueller, 62, of Bartleso; Sister Kathleen McGuire, 54, of Ridgway, and Sister Barbara Ann Muttra, 69, of Springfield. They were veterans of

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