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WORLD NEWS



AP/Wide World Photos

A dead Palestinian is loaded onto a truck at an east Jerusalem hospital last Friday Feb. 25. Israeli officials put the death toll from the massacre at 39.

Pope calls massacre of worshipers 'savage'

Local deacon viewed unrest

By John Thavis and Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Pope John Paul II condemned the "savage massacre" of Muslim worshipers in the West Bank town of Hebron and the bombing of a Catholic Church in Lebanon.

"In this dark scenario of violence, one hears the voice of God, who says: 'Peace to those far and near.' For this peace, today more than ever, we must pray," the pope said Feb. 27 during his mid-day Angelus address.

Latin-rite Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem called the attack a "crime against humanity" and called on Israel to disarm Jewish settlers in the occupied territories.

Israeli officials put the death toll from the Feb. 25 shooting of worshipers in the Hebron mosque at 39. A U.S.-born Jewish settler, Dr. Baruch Goldstein, opened fire with an automatic rifle in the mosque crowded with worshipers for special Friday prayers during the holy month of Ramadan.

The mosque is located at the biblical Cave of the Patriarchs, which tradition says is the burial place of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is a site holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Patriarch Sabbah said that if Israeli authorities cannot ensure the safety of believers at such holy places, some form of international protection should be established.

The Palestine Liberation Organization has called for the same guarantee of security for the West Bank.

Deacon Richard Lombard was among Catholics from the Rochester diocese who attended Mass at a church in Bethlehem the day of the massacre in Hebron located about five miles away.

Along with other U.S. pilgrims, the diocesan Catholics were compelled to wait in a church courtyard as a confrontation between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians took place on the street outside the church. Lombard said the group waited and prayed until a break in the street battle gave the pilgrims a chance to get on their bus a few blocks away.

"There was a lot of confusion and yelling in the streets," he said. He added that he felt the pilgrims were never in any serious danger.

Two days after the Hebron attack, a mortar bomb exploded in a Maronite Catholic Church in Lebanon as people were lining up to receive Communion. It was not immediately known who was responsible for planting the bomb.

The pope said the bombing was a crime against God, against the children of God and against a holy place.

Catholic reaction to the massacre in Hebron focused not only on concern for the victims and outrage that it happened in a place of prayer, but also on its threat to the Middle East peace process.

"Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization need to reach a concrete agreement on the autonomy of the Gaza Strip and Jericho to show their respective intolerant fringes that only dialogue will bring peace," the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, said.

"This was an act of gratuitous violence aggravated by the fact that it happened in a holy place against people who were praying and at a very important and delicate time in the search for justice and peace," a Vatican spokesman said Feb. 25.

The spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, said the massacre was "a gesture against peace and against justice, and one hopes that it will not contribute to the further prolonging of suffering and hatred in a land already so tried."

Israel reacted to the mosque massacre by declaring a crackdown on Jewish extremists. It authorized the use of administrative detention to hold leaders of the Kach movement without trial or charges.

Goldstein, who died inside the mosque, was a member of the Kach movement, founded by the late American rabbi Meir Kahane.

Members of the movement, like other militant Jewish settlers, want to claim all of the territory corresponding to the ancient land of Israel.

The PLO demanded that Israel exercise more control over the settlers and that it confiscate their weapons.

Patriarch Sabbah told Catholic News Service Feb. 27 that he believes the Israeli government recognizes that the settlers are a true obstacle to peace and that it is trying to deal with the problem. But the mosque attack calls for stronger measures.

"I think they must take real and serious steps toward disarming" settlers who have a "dogmatic mentality which is incompatible with any peace," the patriarch said.