

## Bosnia's Catholic leaders assess war's damage

By Agostino Bono  
Catholic News Service

ROME — As Bosnian nights lengthened and Serbs stretched their military gains, Catholic leaders in the war zones angrily assessed the physical, religious and political damage of the fighting.

Cardinal Vinko Puljic of the Serb-besieged capital of Sarajevo condemned the "immoral attitude" of the United Nations, which he said has remained neutral while Serbian aggressors destroy their weaker opponents.

Bishop Franjo Komarica of Banja Luka criticized "the horror, the death, the humiliation" in his northern Bosnian diocese. The diocese includes Bihac, the Muslim-held city that was the scene of fierce Serb attacks beginning in late November and continuing into December.

The stepped-up Serb offensive in Bosnia-Herzegovina began in the second half of November and continued into December, throwing international mediation efforts into disarray. This increased the probabilities that the fighting would only stop when there is a clear victor in the battlefield, where Serbs dominate.

Catholic concern was underscored by Pope John Paul II, who restated his desire to visit Sarajevo as "a sign of my closeness to Catholics" and the other groups "tried by the war."

The pope said Nov. 28 that he made the visit offer at a time when the fighting "has re-ignited and rages in a very worrying way."

The offer was made to Cardinal Puljic, whom the pope had inducted two days earlier into the College of Cardinals.

Bishop Komarica, who accompanied Cardinal Puljic to the Vatican induction ceremony, said the "tragic escalation of this absurd war" has not shaken the "indifference of the world."

The war "drags along with it the ruins of a Europe of justice and a West of solidarity," said Bishop Komarica.

The fighting shows that international organizations are in retreat and "incapable of being a bulwark against violence," he said.

In their offensive, the Serbs held U.N. troops as hostages to discourage air attacks against their positions by the

North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Cardinal Puljic, Bosnia's first cardinal, took advantage of the induction ceremony to grant news interviews in which he pleaded for a negotiated end to the fighting and urged the United Nations to take sides to protect the victims of aggression.

"I cannot understand the attitude of the United Nations, which declares itself neutral, but with this neutrality accepts the law of the strongest to the detriment of the weakest," said the cardinal.

The arms embargo also only favors the better-armed Serbs "to the detriment of the weakest," he added.

U.N. officials have said that the mission of their troops is not to intervene in the war but to enforce a truce if the warring parties ever agree to one.

Cardinal Puljic said lack of strong international action at the start of the fighting more than two years ago is mainly responsible for the current situation.

"A mistake was made in the beginning, when an immediate end should have been put to the aggression and the shooting stopped," he said. "If this had been done, people would have continued to dialogue in a different social climate."

Although the fighting involves Muslims, mostly Orthodox Serbs and mainly Catholic Croats, religion is not the cause of the war, he said.

The war is an attempt by the Serb-controlled army of the old Yugoslavia "to impede the establishment of democracy," he said.

"The army refused to accept democracy, because with it the Serbs would have lost all their privileges and been forced to divide their power with others," Cardinal Puljic said.

World leaders "tacitly tolerated the Serb aggression; consequently the situation became radical, and the people under attack, the victims, were forced to take up arms and defend themselves,"

he added.

This allowed the Serbs to occupy 30 percent of Croatia and 70 percent of Bosnia-Herzegovina and begin an "ethnic cleansing system" which has become "a true and proper genocide," he said.

Another grave problem "is the radicalization that is maturing both within the Serb Orthodox Church and the Muslim community," severely hindering contacts between the leaders of the two groups, he said.

This hardening of religious attitudes goes against the grain of Bosnia's traditional ethnic and religious tolerance, he added.

On the one hand Serbian Orthodox leaders have not been strong enough in condemning war crimes, he said.

On the other, Muslims have been drawing nearer to Islamic fundamentalist countries which support their cause, he said. "With the prolonging of the war, fundamentalism is gaining more room."

Not enough international attention has been given to the plight of Croatian Catholics, the smallest of Bosnia's warring groups, he said. "Two dioceses are on the verge of disappearing and no one protects us."

Meanwhile, the physical and psychological toll on the victims of the fighting has made them "tired, fed-up, tough," said Catholic Relief Services Director Kenneth Hackett.

"You don't see any fat people," he said after returning from Sarajevo at the end of November.

There is an "undercurrent of stress" caused by the physical danger of being shot at by snipers or being on the receiving end of an artillery shell, he added.

Simple things such as putting eggs back into the pasta mix engender enthusiasm, Hackett said.

It may be that the reappearance of eggs in the spartan diet "gave the people of the city ... some sense of normalcy," Hackett said.

U.N. troops assigned to protect the constantly disrupted humanitarian assistance seem to Sarajevans mostly interested in protecting themselves from Serb fire, he said.



AP/Wide World Photos

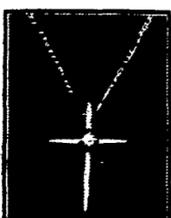
### Shaken ferry survivors

Romi Navarro, right, still clutching her statue of the baby Jesus, tries to calm down by drinking a cup of coffee with her father-in-law, Adriano Navarro, shortly after they arrived in Manila after being rescued from the sunken passenger ferry MV Cebu City. The ferry carrying more than 500 people aboard sank Dec. 2 after colliding with the container ship MV Kota Suria from Singapore.

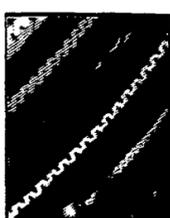
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