

WORLD & NATION

Pope condemns massacre in Chiapas

CASTEL GANDOLFO, Italy (CNS) — Pope John Paul II condemned the massacre of 45 Mexican peasants and called for continued dialogue to resolve the social tensions in the southern Chiapas state.

Mexican authorities charged a mayor and some 40 others in the Dec. 22 attack on the village of Acteal. Men, women and children — many of whom had been praying in church — were slain by gunfire and their bodies disfigured afterward with machetes.

"The joy of this Christmas holiday has been disturbed by a cruel episode in a church of the San Cristobal de las Casas Diocese in Mexico, where a number of people gathered in prayer were massacred," the pope said at a noon blessing Dec. 26 at his villa outside Rome.

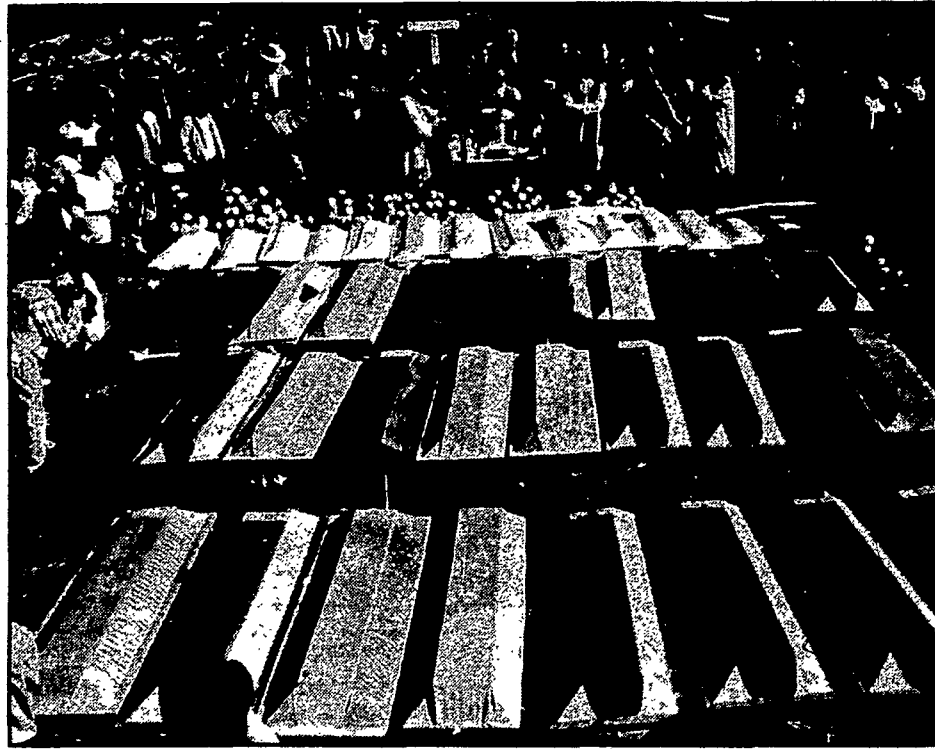
"With a deeply saddened soul, I raise a prayer of supplication for the victims and implore the Lord's comfort for relatives and for the Catholic community," he said.

"I hope the solutions to the social problems hanging over Chiapas will be sought in dialogue and in fraternal solidarity," he added.

Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia of San Cristobal de las Casas celebrated a funeral Mass in the village, praying over the coffins of each victim and asking for forgiveness. Those killed were Tzotzil Indians. Their relatives recited prayers in their native language.

After the killings, tensions remained high in the region and thousands of peasants were reported to have fled their homes in fear of other attacks by paramilitary groups that roam the Chiapas state.

Leftist rebels have accused the government of condoning the latest attack, an accusation strongly denied by national and state authorities. Survivors of the massacre said the attackers were mostly men from a neighboring village who be-



CNS/Reuters

Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia of San Cristobal de las Casas celebrates Christmas Mass before 45 villagers gunned down Dec. 22 in Acteal, Chiapas, Mexico.

longed to Mexico's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party.

A Dec. 22 statement issued by the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas called the killings a "bloody massacre" by an armed group of "paramilitary men or death squads from the area." It asked "permanent prayers" that the killings end against the Indians.

The statement did not say who was behind the murders.

It described the Indians as displaced people who were living in a temporary encampment after being forced to flee their homes because of the violence in the area.

"This group of displaced brothers and

sisters belong to a civic and pacifist group called 'Las Abejas' (the Bees), a group which is seeking a negotiated and political solution, without the use of violence" to the region's conflicts, it said.

Among the signers of the diocesan statement were Father Felipe Toussaint, vicar general, and Father Gonzalo Ituarte, vicar for justice and peace.

At least 3,500 people have fled because they are afraid of attack, said the National Human Rights Commission president, Mireille Rocatti, according to news reports from the region.

Local Indian leaders say 8,000 people have fled.

Kennedy fund aids university

CENTERVILLE, Mass. (CNS) — Michael Kennedy was working to establish a Catholic university in Angola at the time of his death Dec. 31. Because of his work in raising funds to get the university started, the school's library will be named after him.

The announcement was made in a letter from Cardinal Alexandre do Nascimento of Luanda, Angola's capital city. The letter was read during the Jan. 3 funeral Mass for Kennedy at Our Lady of Victory Church.

The unnamed university will accept its first students in February and, after a year of remedial tutoring, will offer college-level courses in 1999.

According to Brian O'Connor, press secretary for Kennedy's brother, U.S. Rep. Joseph Kennedy, D-Mass., Michael Kennedy established the Angola Educational Assistance Fund in 1997 as a way to help raise money for the university.

Michael Kennedy also served as a founding board member of the university.

The fund operated out of the offices of another Kennedy-sponsored project, Citizens Energy Corp., a nonprofit firm that provides home heating fuel to the poor and shelter to the homeless.

Citizens Energy had done some charitable work in Angola in the past, but Kennedy wanted to make a longer-lasting contribution, said Filippo Nardin, the Angola fund's executive director.

Kennedy, 39, died in a New Year's Eve skiing accident in Aspen, Colo.

Kennedy, the son of assassinated U.S. Sen. Robert Kennedy, was buried in Holyhood Cemetery in Brookline, Mass.



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