

WORLD & NATION

Exiled bishop deplures deaths, repression in Sudan

By Dan Morris-Young
Catholic News Service

SAN FRANCISCO — Describing events unfolding in his diocese as "ethnic annihilation" and "a hidden holocaust," Sudanese Bishop Macram Max Gassis appealed to a San Francisco audience May 19 to become "ambassadors for justice and peace in the Sudan."

Head of the El Obeid Diocese in central Sudan since 1983, Bishop Gassis painted in stark terms what he said have been ongoing acts of death and repression by the African nation's fundamentalist Islamic government since it seized power in 1989. He described:

- Aerial bombardment of areas said to be under "rebel control," the targets of ten being livestock and those tending them, airstrips used for relief supply flights, crops and villages.

- "Politically induced famine" in which relief supplies are denied starving tribes people unless they agree to convert to Islam.

- Abduction and forced slavery of women and children.

- Restrictive laws that effectively turn anyone who is not a fundamentalist Muslim into a "second-class citizen."

Bishop Gassis has lived in exile since coming to the United States for cancer surgery in 1990. He was warned by sympathizers not to return and today admits "it would be death" if he were to be discovered in Sudan in the wake of his international campaign to shed light on policies and events there. However, he has slipped surreptitiously back into his diocese on risky flights carrying relief materials — everything from food and medicines to ox-driven plows.

"Only the church will not abide by the restrictions" imposed on nongovernmental relief organizations by the United



Gabriel Meyer/CNS

Bishop Macram Max Gassis of El Obeid, Sudan, and members of his flock of Nuba Catholics gather during Holy Week 1999 under what he calls his cathedral of sycamore trees.

Nations and the Sudanese government, the bishop said. The U.N.-backed operation known as Operation Lifeline Sudan sends relief materials into the country, but the relief is subject to government direction.

Bishop Gassis has spoken before U.N. human rights groups, before the European Parliament in Brussels, before a committee of the U.S. Congress, and to various leaders of the world's Catholic bishops' conferences. In mid-May he had private sessions with San Francisco Archbishop William J. Levada and Los Angeles Cardinal Roger M. Mahony. He was introduced at the May 19 gathering at St. Mary's Cathedral Conference Center by

Gabriel Meyer, an award-winning journalist from Los Angeles who has written about the bishop and now for the past three years has worked with him.

Calling the 61-year-old prelate "one of the greatest Christian leaders of the world," Meyer said his experiences "with the church of martyrs" in the Sudan and with the bishop had "changed my priorities" in life.

"I am not a great man, but only a shepherd," Bishop Gassis said, "a shepherd in love, in love with my people and in love with my country."

While reliable numbers are hard to come by, it seems clear that the largely Catholic people of the Nuba Mountains

in the El Obeid Diocese have been decimated during more than a decade of internal turmoil. According to the Nuba Relief, Rehabilitation and Development Society in Nairobi, Kenya, "out of a pre-war population of more than 2 million, not more than 500,000 Nuba, at most, still cling to a precarious life" in the mountains, Meyer said.

Bishop Gassis said the Khartoum government persecutes not only Christians, but moderate Muslims and persons of traditional African religions. "I have many friends who are Muslims, and many of them have put themselves in danger for me," he said.

"Ninety-five percent of the Muslims are not fundamentalists," he added. "The government is run by a minority of gangsters and killers."

"It is not religion" that the government is promoting, he underscored, "but a political and economic ideology being charred as a religion and as a lever to kill. We are being governed by the barrel of a gun."

"There will be no solution," Bishop Gassis said, "unless the international community puts pressure" on the regime in Khartoum, Sudan's capital. His message to the cathedral audience and to U.S. and international leaders is to convince the Sudan government to allow a "land corridor" as well as an "air exclusion zone" into his diocese, which unlike the other 10 dioceses in the large nation does not border another country.

No international relief organizations have been officially allowed into the Nuba Mountains which are located within his diocese. His diocese alone "is two and one-half times the size of Italy," he noted.

His peoples' needs are immediate and basic, he said: safe and abundant water, access to aid and support in education.

Cardinal warns Congress about research

By Mark Pattison
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Cardinal William H. Keeler of Baltimore, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee for Pro-Life Activities, has written to members of Congress criticizing an upcoming federal report on embryonic stem-cell research as "gravely deficient."

"This administration's efforts to circumvent current law to fund destructive experiments without congressional authorization are hypocritical and morally incoherent," Cardinal Keeler said in the May 27 letter.

The report on stem-cell research to be issued by the National Bioethics Advisory Commission, created by President Clinton, was due out in June. Cardinal Keeler

was responding to news reports in May about a draft report of the commission.

The commission "makes three important concessions regarding destructive embryo research, then draws exactly the wrong conclusion from them," the cardinal said.

"As long as embryos are destroyed as part of the research enterprise," says the commission, "researchers using the embryonic stem cells — and those who fund them — will be complicit in the death of embryos." But the commission then concludes that Congress should change the law so taxpayers will be forced to subsidize the killing of human embryos," Cardinal Keeler said.

Congress in 1995 passed a bill blocking all such funding after a 1994 report from the National Institutes of Health

said certain kinds of research on human embryos warranted federal support. Congress has renewed the ban each year.

"The commission recognizes that millions of Americans see the human embryo as a human being with a right to life, and that disagreements on this question cannot be ignored or easily resolved," Cardinal Keeler said.

"But it proceeds to argue that in a pluralistic society, these millions of Americans must suppress their consciences and support this destructive experimentation," he continued. "Just the opposite is true: In a pluralistic society, government must not force millions of taxpayers to subsidize what they know to be the unjust taking of innocent human life."

While the commission says that research posing moral problems should not be considered unless "necessary" to cure life-endangering disease, the cardinal said, "the commission does not draw the sensible conclusion from its own premise: that startling new advances in adult stem cells and other means for regenerating human tissue should be explored first to see if embryonic stem-cell research is 'unnecessary.'"

"This research is allied with a noble cause," the draft report stated, noting the potential good the research may yield.

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Hope

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talized, the pope told patients, "you can be close to all our brothers and sisters who suffer in various parts of the world where the right to life and to health is violated daily."

Throughout his visit to Ancona, the pope prayed and pleaded for peace in Yugoslavia.

Pope John Paul said he could not come to the Adriatic shore and not think about all the refugees who see the sea as "a difficult path of hope" to escape the war and build a better life. Thousands of refugees from Kosovo and Albania have made the crossing to Italy illegally, often in unsafe boats.

Speaking after a morning Mass in Ancona, the pope also condemned the environmental damage caused by the NATO bombing.

Two barefoot fishermen had brought the pope a basket of fish during the offertory procession; Italian newspapers said the two were out of work because the NATO practice of jets dumping excess bombs in the Adriatic before returning to their bases in Italy had made fishing in the area dangerous.

During his Angelus address, the pope asked for prayers that "humanity could find the courage for reconciliation. May dialogue, solidarity and love prevail over the many forms of arrogance and falsehood."

"May the Lord comfort and help the thousands of children, women, elderly and ill who are innocent victims of the war," he prayed. The pope said he would dedicate his celebration of the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ to prayers for peace in the Balkans.

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