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Pakistan bishops worry about country's Christians

By Stephen Steele
Catholic News Service

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — Bishops in Pakistan expressed grave concern for the safety of the country's minority Christian population in the wake of U.S.-British air strikes against the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

Several bishops who spoke to Catholic News Service voiced concern that the air strikes, coupled with a potential ground war, could make Christians a target for violence by Islamic fundamentalists.

Archbishop Lawrence J. Saldanha of Lahore, chairman of the bishops' justice and peace commission, said he saw the Oct. 7 air strikes "as a necessary means to an end." The archbishop told CNS that he had expected the United States to strike against the Taliban once all diplomatic measures were exhausted.

"We had hoped that a solution could have been worked out in a more peaceful way. Now we hope that it will be a short and quick operation, and from this some good will come," he said.

In the city of Lahore, most Catholics live in clusters and have been the beneficiaries of a large police presence on the city's streets, he said. But pockets of Catholic families that live in remote villages outside



Martin Lueders/CNS

A Pakistani woman prays during Mass at St. Michael's Catholic Church in Peshawar, Pakistan, Oct. 7, the day the U.S. launched attacks in Afghanistan.

the city "are small and helpless," he said.

The archbishop said that, since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, he has met with local government and Muslim leaders to express "that we Christians are also Pakistanis."

Auxiliary Bishop Everest Pinto of Karachi met with local officials in the Sindh province Oct. 6, requesting that the Catholic communities there be protected.

Authorities said they would patrol Catholic communities in the evenings, "but they made it clear that their numbers are limited," the bishop said.

The bishop also met with 15 pastors from the diocese Oct. 6 to discuss ways of improving security at churches and in Catholic neighborhoods.

"There is a lot of fear among Christians right now," he said. The bishop said Islamic fundamentalists in Karachi have issued the threat, "For every Afghan killed, we will kill two Christians."

Less than 2 percent of Pakistan's population of 142 million are Christian.

The bishop told CNS "violence at any time isn't justified."

"We knew it would come, but we hoped there would be some other way that the U.S. would achieve its objectives," he said.

Bishop Anthony T. Lobo of Islamabad-Rawalpindi returned to Pakistan Oct. 8

from the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican. He immediately scheduled an emergency meeting of all priests for Oct. 13.

Catholic schools in the diocese were ordered closed Oct. 8 as were schools in the Archdiocese of Karachi and the Diocese of Hyderabad. Individual schools were closed in the country's other dioceses.

Bishop Max J. Rodrigues of Hyderabad told diocesan priests to keep in close contact with elders in Catholic villages to monitor developments. He also urged them to limit their movements as much as possible, to avoid demonstrations and to be inside after nightfall.

The bishop told CNS that he informed foreign missionaries to "listen to what their embassies are saying," and told them that were free to leave the diocese if they felt their lives were in danger. One missionary has temporarily left the country, he said.

Bishop Rodrigues said he did not support military action by the United States against Afghanistan because of the potential for the loss of innocent life. He also said that a prolonged U.S.-led conflict could lead to attacks against Christians.

"This always seems to be the case, even though we are not connected politically to the United States in any way. First and foremost, we are loyal to our own country and want what is best for Pakistan," he said.

Air strikes

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Christian community there.

Lebanese Cardinal Nasrallah P. Sfeir questioned whether the air strikes would prove effective in the long run.

"This attack was somewhat inevitable ... but will it resolve the question? There will be new terror attacks in other places," he told the Vatican news agency, Fides, during a break in the synod's proceedings.

He said the key to ending terrorism was "dialogue and justice, especially the social justice that is needed all across the world. But there has been none of this." The justice issue involves the Palestinian-Israeli situation in a particular way, he said.

"One cannot accept the fact that every

day there are victims, people who suffer, complaints that go unanswered. I think if there is justice in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, tensions will lessen," he said.

Jesuit Father Thomas Michel, who has worked for years in Christian-Islamic dialogue, said the military retaliation could harden the views of some Muslims, especially if there are civilian casualties.

"Very few Muslims that I know have any sympathy for the Taliban, but they do have a lot of sympathy for the Afghan people," he said in an interview in Rome.

"I think we've got to keep the focus on the people. It's easy to demonize individual leaders, whether it's Saddam Hussein or bin Laden or now the Taliban leadership. But the ones who are going to suffer are the ordinary people who want to get

on with their lives," he said.

"We felt shocked and horrified at the innocent victims in the World Trade Center, and we have to have the same concern for innocent victims wherever they are."

In Israel, two officials of the Latin-rite Patriarchate of Jerusalem criticized the U.S.-British air strikes.

"We need to fight terrorism wherever it is, but we need to be precise about our goals and objectives before we hit," said Father Majdi al-Siryani, legal director of the patriarchate. "I am for fighting against terrorism, but we have to define what terrorism is."

"I think the attack was too quick," the priest said. "I really feel sad for the Afghan people who barely even have anything to eat. I hope this does not harm them any more than they already are hurt."

Father al-Siryani of Beit Sahour said his main fear was repercussions and noted that already it was being described as a war of "Christianity vs. Islam" and one of "infidels vs. the faithful."

To a certain extent, this description was liable to affect the relations between Christian and Muslim extremists within the

Palestinian community, he said.

"We do not have a strong rule of law here, and there are ignorant people who could use it against us," he said.

Father Raed Abusahlia, chancellor of the patriarchate, said he would advise the American people to listen to bin Laden's videotaped message to understand why the United States had been targeted.

"The attack of yesterday will be useless and will only create more confusion in the world," Father Abusahlia said Oct. 8. "It won't resolve the issue of terrorism ... it will only cause more hatred and will give more pretexts to Muslim extremists."

"If they want to resolve the issue of terrorism, they have to go to the deep causes of this. America needs to ask why it is hated all over the world," he said.

The "mother of all violence in the Middle East and in all the world," he said, is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and he said the U.S. support for Israel angered the Arab and Muslim world.

"Resolve this conflict and you resolve 90 percent of the conflicts of the world," he said.

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