

Church leaders deplore bombings

John Thavis/CNS

VATICAN CITY — Deadly bombings in Iraq and the Holy Land drew sharp condemnation from Pope John Paul II and other church officials, who urged fresh steps to end violence against civilians and humanitarian workers.

Church experts were among those shocked and saddened at the death of longtime U.N. human rights specialist Sergio Vieira de Mello and 22 others in a suicide attack against U.N. headquarters in Baghdad Aug. 19.

The same day in Jerusalem, a Palestinian militant blew up a crowded bus, killing 20 people — several of them children. The attack set in motion Israeli reprisal raids, including the assassination of a senior leader of Hamas in Gaza.

The pope, speaking at a general audience Aug. 20, said news of the attacks in the region “can only generate deep sadness and total condemnation in our heart.”

“While we entrust to divine mercy those who lost their lives and implore comfort for the bereaved, we pray to the God of peace that wisdom will prevail in hearts and that those responsible for civil society will know how to break this sorrowful spiral of hatred and violence,” he said.

News of de Mello’s death prompted an immediate papal telegram to Kofi Annan, U.N. secretary-general. The telegram, sent in the pope’s name by Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Vatican secretary of state, said the pontiff was offering “fervent prayers for the victims and asks almighty God to comfort those who mourn at this time of tragic loss.”

“Imploring all involved in perpetrating acts of violence to abandon the ways of hatred, His Holiness prays that the path of reconciliation will prevail and that the people of Iraq will know a new era of peace, justice and social harmony,” it said.

In an interview with Vatican Radio, the Vatican’s representative to the United Nations, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, said the bombing was a vicious and irrational act against an agency that is trying to bring humanitarian aid to Iraq.

He said de Mello had been doing an excellent job as human rights commissioner before his assignment in Iraq.

“I feel a sense of dismay and indignation at the cruel fate of a man of great value for the United Nations and for all the victims of the attack, and for the prospects of this reconciliation process which is already



Reuters/CNS

A Palestinian suicide bomber was suspected in an Aug. 19 bus-bombing attack in Jerusalem that killed at least 20 people. A suicide attack at the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad the same day killed 23.

very difficult,” he said.

Other Vatican diplomats remembered de Mello, a 55-year-old native of Brazil, as a highly efficient champion of people whose rights were being trampled.

“He was very active and extraordinarily well-liked,” said Coadjutor Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, Ireland, the former Vatican representative to U.N. organizations in Geneva.

In June, de Mello took a leave from his post as the Geneva-based U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights to head the U.N. mission in postwar Iraq.

“What struck me was the story of his death,” Archbishop Martin said in an Aug. 20 telephone interview from Dublin. “He spent most of his life working to protect victims of violence, and it appears he died alone in his office without protection.”

De Mello, he said, “represented what is best in international public service. He was efficient, hard-working, dedicated, an idealist, yet realistic.”

Archbishop Martin said many Catholic charitable organizations, particularly those working with refugees, had contacts with de Mello. His closest work with Catholics probably occurred in 1999-2002 when he was head of the U.N. mission overseeing East Timor’s transi-

tion to independence, the archbishop said.

Archbishop Renato Martino, the former Vatican observer at the United Nations in New York, told Vatican Radio he knew the diplomat well.

“I was devastated when I heard what happened,” the archbishop said Aug. 20. He said de Mello “was very kind to everyone” and got the best out of his collaborators.

The head of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Migration, Coadjutor Bishop Thomas G. Wenski of Orlando, Fla., said that besides killing de Mello the bombing of U.N. headquarters in Iraq had deprived the world of another advocate for refugee services: Arthur Helton, a U.S. lawyer specializing in immigration and refugee issues.

“Those who flee war and persecution also lost a friend and advocate” in Helton, Bishop Wenski said in a statement Aug. 21.

Helton “dedicated his life to the protection of the victims of war, first as director of the Refugee Project at the Lawyers Committee on Human Rights and most recently as a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City,” the bishop said.

Speaking of de Mello, Bishop Wenski said the Brazilian had “worked tirelessly to bring peace to war-torn nations and to end the suffering of peoples affected by war, especially

refugees” in Southeast Asia. The U.N. envoy’s death “is a tragic loss,” he said.

The president of Catholic Relief Services, Ken Hackett, said the bombing was “not just an attack on the U.N. but on the Iraqi people, many of whom were kept alive through years of sanctions by the efforts of the United Nations and their humanitarian work.”

“The attack is an affront to all who work for peace and human rights,” Hackett said in a statement.

While pledging to keep up its own humanitarian programs in Iraq, CRS called for the international community and the United States to take the necessary steps to provide a secure and stable environment for the delivery of assistance.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a federal agency that monitors religious freedom around the world, called de Mello’s death an enormous loss for the United Nations and for human rights protection.

The Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace said it was stunned and saddened by news of de Mello’s death. Roger Dubois, president of the organization, said it was a tragedy for “all peoples who espouse the United Nations’ values of peace, democracy and human rights.”

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