

THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

Lebanese Christians caught in crossfire desperate for help

Elena Curti

EMERGENCY AID is urgently needed for thousands of Christians who have chosen to stay in their southern Lebanon villages which are being bombed by the Israelis.

Bishop Elias Nassar of Saida diocese said this week his people were appealing to the Church for help. Seven villages in his diocese have been destroyed, forcing up to 2,000 people to leave. Another 22 villages have been damaged with inhabitants evacuating to Beirut where they remain in danger. The bishop said that Christian villages in Tyre and Saida had been targeted because armed Hezbollah forces had infiltrated the region. Despite this, many people were desperate to stay in their homes, fearing that if they left, they might not be able to return.

Elias Nassar, 46, who has been a bishop for only six months, prepared a detailed report on his diocese for the charity, Aid to the Church in Need, explaining that local communities were increasingly calling on the Church for emergency help.

The Lebanese Government was prioritising aid to Muslim communities, overlooking the plight



An Israeli soldier covers his ears as a mortar fires into Lebanon from the Israel-Lebanon border. Photo: CNS/Carlos Barria, Reuters

of Christians whose situation was in some cases just as bad if not worse.

“People here want to know: can things get any worse? They are very afraid. They have run out of the most basic of supplies. They keep asking me for help and I have nothing to give them,” he said.

Food, clean water, milk and medicine were urgently needed and, despite the destruction of roads, bridges and power lines, the bishop was confident that the Church’s infrastructure would enable him to get emergency aid through to villages in some of the most remote areas.

According to Aid to the Church in Need, Lebanon has for many years been seen by church lead-

ers as a sanctuary for Christians in the Middle East, and the clash between Hezbollah and Israel has prompted fears that an exodus of Christians from the region could spell disaster for the survival of the Church in the whole region. The director of a centre east of Saida run by the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarchate of Lebanon described the situation as “tragic and catastrophic”.

“Dear friends, in the eyes of adults and children, only fear is to be seen. Essential materials for survival are hardly to be found,” said Fr Antoine Dib, director of the Providence Centre in a message appealing for help.

See Anthony O’Mahony, page 4

Iraqi Church community flees anarchy

HALF OF Iraq’s Christian population has left the country in the last five years, according to Bishop Andreas Abouna of Baghdad.

In an interview with the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, which supports persecuted Christians around the world, Bishop Abouna said that the number who have fled Baghdad could even be as high as 75 per cent.

Speaking during a visit to London last week, the bishop described how the state of anarchy in Iraq was driving away his flock. “What we are hearing now is the alarm bell for Christianity in Iraq. When so many are leaving from a small community like ours, you know that it is dangerous – dangerous for the future of the Church in Iraq,” he said.

The bishop estimated that 600,000 Christians had left since 2002 – most of them going to Turkey, Jordan and Syria, where they sought sanctuary, initially on a temporary basis. The signs of them returning in the near future, however, were “increasingly bleak”.

While stressing that Christians were not being targeted any more than other groups, Bishop Abouna spoke of how the faithful felt especially isolated and vulnerable as their numbers dwindle. Those left behind were the most vulnerable and had been too poor or too weak to leave. Many were out of a job and lacking food and other vital supplies.

A year ago Bishop Abouna lobbied hard to ensure that the freedom of Christians was enshrined in Iraq’s constitution, but now, he says, the political process has failed and he describes a situation of complete turmoil. “Everyone is asking: when will the violence stop? They want to rest. They cannot live like this – every day there are these terrible things.”

Pope renews calls for peace in Middle East

POPE BENEDICT renewed his appeal for peace in the Middle East and said he was deeply disappointed that calls for an immediate ceasefire in Lebanon had been ignored, writes John Thavis, of the Catholic News Service.

Peace is both a gift of God and the product of political commitment, and all people of goodwill have a duty to work for an end to hostilities, the Pope said when he delivered his Sunday blessing from the balcony of his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo outside Rome.

In an address that marked the feast of the Transfiguration of the

Lord, the Pope said Christ’s salvation was sorely needed in a world threatened by the “shadows of evil”, including fratricidal conflict in the Middle East.

“Faced with the bitter fact that up to now the calls for an immediate ceasefire in that martyred region have been disregarded, I feel impelled to renew my pressing appeal to that effect, asking everyone to offer their real contribution to the construction of a just and lasting peace,” he continued.

Fighting between Israel and the Hezbollah militia continued to escalate. Israeli air strikes in Lebanon since 12 July have killed

around 1,000 people – mostly civilians – and destroyed roads and bridges, while Hezbollah rocket attacks against northern Israel have killed more than 100 people. As *The Tablet* was going to press, hopes of an early vote at the United Nations on a peace plan were fading, with the Arab League demanding a clause inserted calling for an immediate Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

Pope Benedict explains the reasons for his appeals in a pre-recorded interview to be broadcast this weekend in Germany.

See Notebook, page 18

AFRICA

Religious volunteer groups ignored in fight against Aids

Ellen Teague

A HIDDEN army of church volunteers is tackling the Aids crisis in Africa with virtually no support from the main international donor bodies.

The value of care carried out by millions of church volunteers working with sufferers, widows and orphans is put at £2.5 billion in a report published this week by the Christian aid agency, Tearfund.

Entitled *Faith Untapped*, the report deplors the fact that the Churches "barely rate a mention in global strategies for tackling Aids in Africa". It has been published to coincide with the sixteenth United Nations International Aids Conference beginning in Toronto this weekend.

The report points out that Church members reach people in their communities who cannot easily be reached by governments and NGOs. With international support and funding, Africa's one million congregations could become "one of the single most effective weapons for halting the pandemic". As things stand, Tearfund says many Churches are stretched almost to breaking point by the scale of the Aids crisis.

Writing in the foreword to *Faith Untapped*, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey of Clifton, underlines the Churches' front-line role, yet acknowledges they have also been part of the problem. "Many people of faith need to think long and hard about the part they have played in feeding the stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV and Aids," he says.

Women are identified in the report as the worst-affected group in the Aids pandemic and gender inequality as one of the top risk factors for women vulnerable to HIV infection. More than one in six South Africans is HIV positive, and the Catholic Church is the largest healthcare provider after the Government, but Church bodies have been unable to access Global Fund money.

"The Global Fund process is too large and too cumbersome for the Churches," adds Sr Alison Munro of the Southern Africa Catholic Bishops' Conference Aids office.

The Catholic Church alone provides more than a quarter of the world's Aids care, according to Caritas Internationalis, but all faith-based organisations combined have received just six per cent of Global Fund money since the first disbursements in 2002.

UGANDA

LRA rebels declare ceasefire

Ellen Teague

UGANDAN REBELS of the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) have declared a ceasefire and called on the country's Government to lay down its arms as a second round of peace talks resumed in south Sudan this week.

The move was welcomed by Fabio Riccardi, a mediator of the Rome-based Sant'Egidio community who has been working with Pax Christi and with Dr Riak Machar Teny, Southern Sudan's Vice-President, to broker discussions.

"The talks have surpassed expectations and we are very happy about the declaration of a ceasefire," Mr Riccardi told *The Tablet* on Monday. "It is a positive move from the rebels but it should be regarded as a first step, for we hope the Ugandan Government will take a similar step."

Mr Riccardi has returned to Italy after spending five weeks in the southern Sudan

town of Juba, but he remains in contact with LRA leaders. Other Sant'Egidio negotiators have taken over his work in Juba.

The cessation of hostilities was issued by the rebels' deputy commander, Vincent Otti, on behalf of LRA leader Joseph Kony.

"We hope that the Government reciprocates this gesture of goodwill so that both parties may finally sign a bilateral agreement to provide a peaceful atmosphere while the peace talks continue," Mr Otti said in a statement.

Last weekend, Mr Riccardi urged Vincent Otti to attend the talks in person, and so upgrade the LRA delegation. "He says he will, but not now," reported Mr Riccardi. "He still fears that if he went to Juba he would be arrested, and so we are asking the Southern Sudan Government to guarantee his safety."

Mr Otti is wanted by the International Criminal Court on war crimes charges. The LRA launched one of the world's most brutal insurrections from north Uganda 20 years ago.

CUBA

Cardinal appeals to US to keep away

Colin Harding

THE HEAD of the Catholic Church in Cuba, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, Archbishop of Havana, appealed to the United States this week not to attempt any "intervention" during the current uncertainty over the future of President Fidel Castro, who will be 80 tomorrow.

Two weeks ago, the Marxist leader handed over power to his 75-year-old brother, Raul, after issuing a communiqué saying he had suffered serious internal bleeding and needed a complicated operation, followed by a period of convalescence. Neither he nor his brother has made any statement or public appearance since then.

Even though the young Fidel Castro was educated by the Jesuits, his Government was strongly anti-clerical for many years, accusing the Catholic Church of being "counter-revolutionary". But the atmosphere has been somewhat more tolerant since President Castro invited Pope John Paul II to visit Cuba in 1998, and Cardinal Ortega has made a point of cultivating cordial relations with the Government.

UNITED STATES

Diocesan report exposes gay affairs

Richard Major

In New York

THE DIOCESE of Springfield, Illinois, has released a damning independent report on its own former bishop, Daniel Ryan, who retired in 1999 amid allegations of sexual misdeeds and misgovernment. Springfield's present bishop, George Lucas, hired a former government lawyer, J. William Roberts, to conduct the investigation, and his report says that Bishop Ryan did indeed engage in "improper sexual conduct and used his office to conceal his activities". The bishop's partners were adult males so no criminality is involved.

Mr Roberts found the "culture of secrecy fostered under Bishop Ryan's leadership discouraged faithful priests from coming forward with information about misconduct with minors". This secrecy extended to the diocesan chancellor, Mgr Eugene Costa, whose behaviour was exposed when he was beaten by two youths he had propositioned in a city park.

AUSTRALIA

Agency highlights deaths of asylum seekers

AS MANY as 12 asylum seekers (including three children) sent back to Afghanistan by Australia were killed on their return, a Church agency in Sydney has claimed, *writes Mark Brolly in Melbourne.*

A delegation from the Christian Brothers-sponsored Edmund Rice Centre visited Afghanistan to investigate the fate of almost 200 failed Afghan asylum seekers who were detained on the Pacific Island of Nauru in 2002 while their applications were processed. It was told three children had been confirmed

dead after their home was bombed, and up to nine men may have been killed.

The centre's director, Phil Glendenning, said: "The families had been told on Nauru by Australian immigration officials that Afghanistan would be safe. It clearly was not." Australia's Immigration Minister, Senator Amanda Vanstone, promised to investigate the centre's claims but said its previous similar reports had been vague and impossible to verify.

Mr Glendenning maintained that the delegation had supplied reliable information.

INDIA

Ghandi backs anti-conversion law campaign

THE PRESIDENT of the Congress Party, Sonia Ghandi, this week joined the campaign against a new law passed in three Indian states aimed at discouraging Hindus from converting to other faiths, *writes Anto Akkara in Delhi.*

Devised by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Jananta Party, the new law requires religious converts to declare their intention a month in advance. Police then investigate whether "force or allurement" is involved.

Mrs Ghandi, chairman of the United Pro-

gressive Alliance heading the federal Government in India, said that "these are enactments passed by the state legislatures where the Congress is in opposition. The Congress Party has opposed this strongly". Mrs Gandhi was born a Catholic in Italy and converted to Hinduism when she married Rajiv Ghandi. Under the new laws, anyone convicted of "indulging in religious conversion by force or allurement" faces a three-year jail term and a fine of 20,000 rupees (£236).

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IN BRIEF

Former US nuncio dies

Archbishop Gabriel Montalvo Higuera, the veteran Vatican diplomat from Colombia who trained a new generation of the Holy See's representatives and helped guide the American Church through the most difficult period in its history, died last week in Rome aged 76. As apostolic nuncio in Washington from 1998 until his retirement last December, the Archbishop was Rome's representative as major revelations of sexual abuse by clergy rocked American Catholicism. He continued the pattern of short-listing doctrinally reliable bishops for episcopal appointments, and installed new heads in the major sees of New York, Washington, Philadelphia, Brooklyn and Boston.

Two Madonnas

Catholics in Milan have protested about a giant poster of the controversial rock star Madonna hanging from scaffolding on the city's famous Duomo. They have been incensed by its appearance on the cathedral whose tallest spire is topped by a gilded statue of the Virgin Mary known as La Madonnina. In a concert in Rome last Sunday the singer appeared on a cross wearing a crown of thorns, leading one Italian cardinal to call for her excommunication. The Milan poster shows her modelling a white jumpsuit for a high-street fashion chain and was approved by a committee overseeing the building's restoration.

Bishop gets death threats

Erwin Kräutler, the Austro-Brazilian Bishop of Xingu in the Brazilian rainforest, has revealed he is receiving death threats for investigating the killers of Sr Dorothy Stang, an American nun shot in February 2005. Bishop Kräutler told the Catholic Press Agency in Vienna that influential politicians involved in the death were still free. He says he has also made enemies by opposing plans to build a gigantic dam in Altamira.

No miracle yet for Mother Mary

A five year-old girl from Sydney who narrowly escaped death in traffic accidents twice within three years is not formally being considered as the miracle required for the canonisation of Australia's first saint, Mother Mary MacKillop. Mother Mary, the co-founder of the Sisters of St Joseph, was born in Melbourne in 1842 and died in Sydney in 1909. She was beatified in Sydney by Pope John Paul II in 1995.

Move to lift Pinochet immunity

A Chilean judge applied to the Santiago court of appeal last week to lift the immunity from prosecution of former President Augusto Pinochet, so he can be investigated for his alleged role in the "disappearance" of a Spanish priest during the military dictatorship of 1973-90. Fr Antonio Llido was arrested in September 1974 and never seen again.

