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Vatican says mission to Syria still on, but no idea when

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The gist of a short announcement from the Vatican today is that a peace mission by the Synod of Bishops on new evangelization to Syria is still on, but there's no clear sense when it might happen.

Because the synod is scheduled to wrap up Sunday, there's a real possibility it could come and go without the announced delegation to Syria materializing.

The text of the statement, released today by the Vatican Press Office, is as follows:

"The announced mission to Syria of representatives of the Holy See and of the Synod of Bishops is still being studied and prepared, in order to carry it out as soon as possible and effectively respond to the identified goals in terms of solidarity, peace and reconciliation, in spite of the severe acts which recently took place in the region."

Observers made three points about the statement.

First, it reflects real doubts about security and stability, especially in the wake of a car bomb attack in the Christian heart of Damascus on Sunday, in the Bab Touma ("Thomas Gate") square. Some observers have interpreted that attack as a direct response to the announcement that a Vatican delegation would visit, while others see it as a more general assault on the Christian population.

In any event, the spike in violence in both Lebanon and Syria over the weekend vastly complicated the situation on the ground.

Second, what the statement doesn't say is that there are also problems with the proposed itinerary of the delegation. Speaking on background, some church officials say it wasn't clear that the Assad regime would make it possible for the delegation to also meet representatives of the opposition, and in that case the danger was the visit could be exploited by the government as a propaganda coup.

Over the weekend, sources told *NCR* that several Western embassies in Rome made that point in exchanges with their opposite numbers in the Vatican.

Third, many observers also say today's statement amounts to an indirect confirmation that the Vatican announced the mission to Syria before working out the logistics, thus leaving it in the position of having to backtrack publicly. It's a case, they say, in which the desire to send a signal of hope, especially to Syria's beleaguered Christian minority, overwhelmed the usual diplomatic caution.

In comments to reporters, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, confirmed that the delegation will not leave tomorrow, as had been reported by some media outlets, and said its departure is not "imminent."

Lombardi said the Vatican is "following the situation," but could not add any details about the delegation's program, assuming that it's able to make its way to Syria.

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