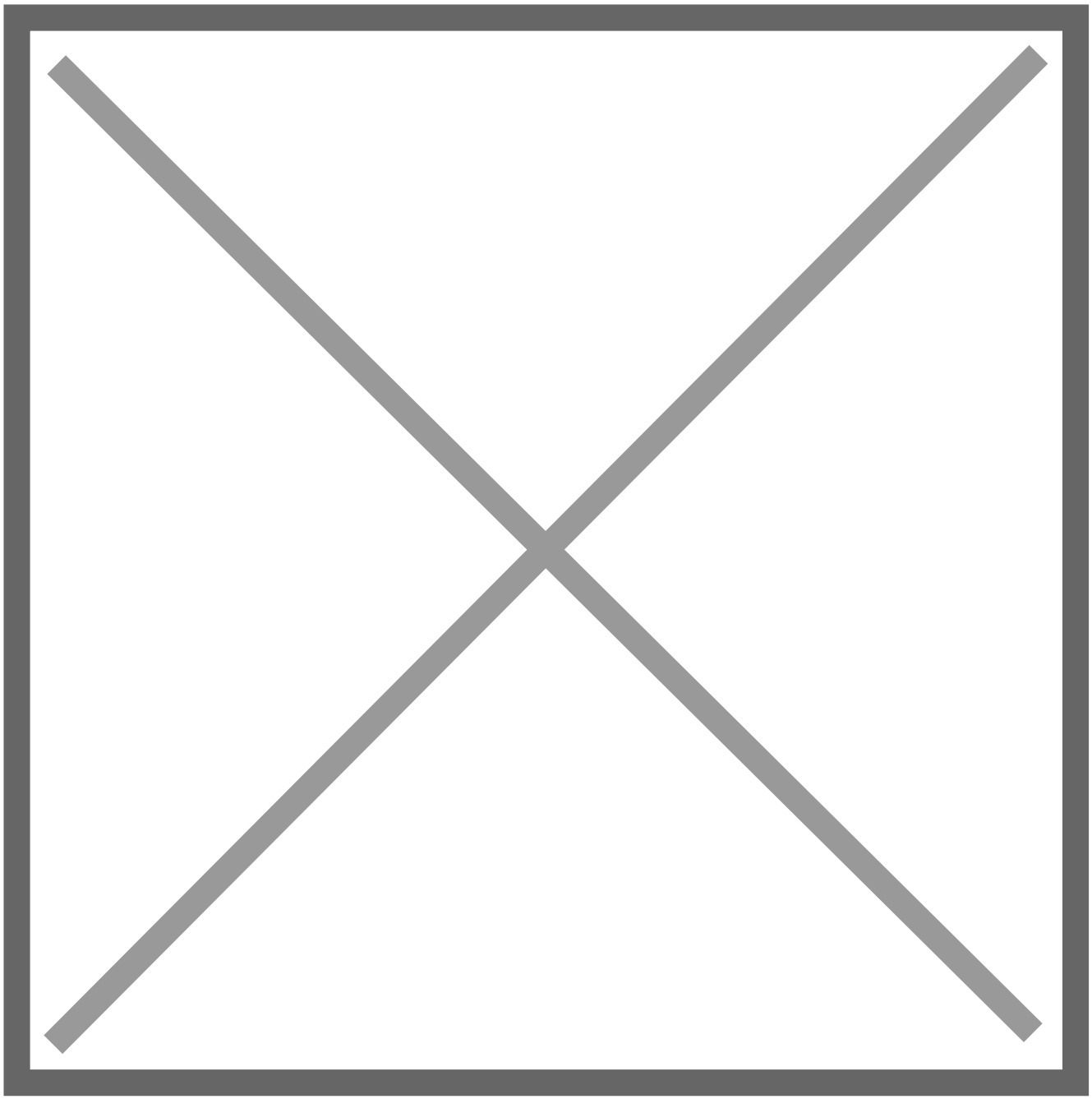
News



Afghan police officers inspect a damaged van after a blast in Kabul June 3, 2021. (CNS photo/Reuters)



by Catholic News Service

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Kabul, Afghanistan — June 14, 2021
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The papal mission to Afghanistan faces an uncertain future as foreign military forces, led by the United States, carry out a gradual withdrawal from the strife-torn nation, the priest who leads the mission said.

"What is worrying is the future. I hope that what has been done remains, that there is no going back as is feared," said Barnabite Fr. Giuseppe Moretti, superior of the 'Missio Sui Iuris' in Kabul since 2002.

The priest's fears are growing as foreign forces in a coalition led by NATO and the U.S. reduce their presence in the homeland of the Taliban in central Asia, ucanews.com reported.

U.S. President Joe Biden has committed to the full withdrawal of American forces by Sept. 11, the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, in what has been the longest ongoing war in U.S. history.

Moretti said his concerns are rooted in an upsurge in violence.

"In recent months, people who have collaborated in the development of the country, professional women or young students, have been killed," he told the Vatican news service Fides.

St. John Paul II, as pope, established the 'Missio Sui Iuris' in Afghanistan in May 2002, led by the Clerics Regular of St. Paul, known as the Barnabites.

The pontifical mission is housed in the Italian embassy, which was the largest contributor to the U.S.-led international military coalition.

The mission's work is limited to charitable and humanitarian activities because the Islamic faith is recognized as the state religion in the country of 37 million people.

The Italian security forces and its humanitarian agencies were mainly stationed in the capital Kabul and Herat. Its activities included training, assistance and advisory activities in western regions of the country.

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About 900 Italian soldiers left Afghanistan June 9 after nearly 20 years on the ground. The Italian contingent experienced 54 deaths.

The Italians "played a significant role from a social as well as a security point of view," earning the esteem of the Afghan people as they helped advance education, said Moretti, a missionary in the country from 1990 to 2015.

A member of the Council of the Paktia Province echoed Moretti's concern.

Abdurahman Qaderi, a lawyer, said that although many people are happy about the departure of foreign military forces, they have expressed concern about the future.

"What is most feared is the risk of a new civil war. We are also frightened by the risk of interference from neighboring countries that might be interested in fostering war," Qaderi told Fides.

Barnabite Fr. Giovanni Scalese, who also serves in the mission, said the Taliban, which established the Islamic emirate of Afghanistan and ruled it until 2001, "could impose a new constitution" with unknown implications.

The mission managed a state-owned school, Tangi Kalay -- School of Peace -- with the help of the Afghan government, which chose the programs and selected the teachers.

Scalese said fewer than 1,000 Christians live in Afghanistan, where the Missionaries of Charity sisters and an inter-congregational and nongovernmental organization called Pro Bambini di Kabul (For the Children of Kabul) are doing humanitarian work while being housed in Kabul.

He expressed optimism, however, and said he did not see a bleak future for Afghanistan.

The Taliban could never "eliminate freedom or ignore the rights Afghanis have got used to all these years," he said.