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A masked archbishop talks to two Turkish doctors with white coats and masks

Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, prefect of the Dicastery for the Eastern Churches, meets with doctors caring for earthquake victims in Aleppo, Syria, Feb. 19, 2023. The archbishop traveled through Turkey and Syria Feb. 17-21 to communicate the pope's closeness to earthquake victims and coordinate relief efforts. (CNS photo/Flavio Pace, courtesy Dicastery for the Eastern Churches)



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Isolating Syria from the international community through sanctions "benefits no one" and complicates relief efforts to the millions left homeless after earthquakes devastated the country, said a top Vatican official who visited Turkey and Syria.

"We are still in the middle of this tragedy because it is not certain that the tremors are over," said Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, prefect of the Dicastery for the Eastern Churches, in an interview published Feb. 23 by the Vatican communications department.

The archbishop traveled to Syria and Turkey Feb. 17-21 to express Pope Francis's closeness to the earthquake victims and coordinate relief efforts to the region. He met with Catholic relief organizations and religious congregations working on the ground as well as with the leaders of Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim communities in the region.

While relief in Turkey can be more organized because of cooperation with the Turkish government, Gugerotti said, Syria is a "broken country" crippled by more than a decade of war and sanctions, which makes oversight of aid nearly impossible.

He described the long wait needed to obtain a visa to enter the country and said that money transfers are "impossible" due to international sanctions that were strengthened in 2011.

In a meeting with priests and monks from various Orthodox churches Feb. 23, Francis prayed that sanctions would not prevent urgent aid from reaching the earthquake victims in Syria.

The U.S. Treasury department Feb. 10 announced a 180-day exemption to its sanctions on Syria for "all transactions related to earthquake relief efforts," yet analysts said the long-term effects sanctions have had on the country's infrastructure is likely the biggest challenge to distributing aid in the country.

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The archbishop called on countries contributing to Syria's international isolation to consider "not only the political end" of their policies, but also "the concrete good of the people that live in the country."

"We have destroyed a reality, we have not built democracy," he said. "When we work to change a political situation," and it does not work, nations must ask "what is the alternative? Because the alternative is chaos."

Much of the territory affected by the earthquake in Syria is controlled by rebel groups through which aid must pass to reach its destination, but some groups block the aid entirely. Gugerotti said that countries providing aid through these groups "don't verify where this money goes and to whom."

Where the government is unable to provide organized relief, religious communities are intervening. Gugerotti cited the work of a Franciscan community in northern Syria who find "more or less legal" channels to deliver aid, without which, he said, "the people would have nothing."

During his trip through the region, the archbishop also visited a mosque in Damascus that hosted families who lost their homes in the disaster and where he encountered babies born during the earthquakes.

He said that throughout the country Christians and Muslims alike are consoled by the same phrase spoken in different languages: "This has happened, let us hope in God."