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Pope Francis and members of the Afghan Community Association in Italy recite prayers in a meeting room behind the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Aug. 7, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Meeting leaders of the Afghan community in Italy, Pope Francis condemned violence and discrimination based on religion and later asked people to pray for an end to discrimination in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan, particularly discrimination against women.

At his weekly general audience Aug. 7, he asked people to work and pray "that ethnic discrimination in regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan would be eliminated and especially discrimination against women."

Before the audience he had met with nine men representing the Afghan Community Association in Italy.

Afghanistan and Pakistan, he told them, "are made up of many peoples, each proud of their culture, traditions and unique way of life."

Unfortunately, he said, instead of "protecting the characteristics and rights of each group," some people use diversity "as a reason for discrimination and exclusion, if not outright persecution."

"The religious factor, by its very nature, should help soften the harshness of contrasts and create space for everyone to be granted full citizenship rights on an equal footing and without discrimination," he said. "Yet oftentimes religion is manipulated and instrumentalized and ends up being used for contrary ends.

"In such cases, religion becomes a factor of confrontation and hatred, which can lead to violent acts," the pope said. "You have often seen this yourselves. I too have seen these difficult moments reported by the news — so much difficulty and pain!"

"One cannot invoke God's name to foment contempt, hatred and violence toward others," Francis told the group, thanking them for their "noble endeavor to promote religious harmony and to strive to overcome misunderstandings between different religions in order to build paths of trusting dialogue and peace."

"May the almighty and merciful God assist government leaders and peoples in building a society where all are accorded full citizenship with equal rights; where everyone can live according to their own customs and culture within a framework that takes into account the rights of all, without abuses of power or discrimination," the pope prayed.

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With the situation in the Middle East remaining tense after the assassination in Iran of a leader of Hamas, at the end of his general audience Francis again expressed his deep concern and called for a cease-fire, starting in Gaza.

"I continue to follow the situation in the Middle East with great concern, and I reiterate my appeal to all the parties involved that the conflict does not spread, and that there may be an immediate cease-fire on all fronts, starting with Gaza, where the humanitarian situation is dire and unsustainable," the pope told the crowd at his audience.

"I pray that the sincere search for peace will extinguish strife, love will overcome hatred and vengeance will be disarmed by forgiveness," he said.

Francis also asked people to join him in praying for Ukraine, Myanmar and Sudan. "May these war-torn populations soon find the peace for which they yearn," he said.