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Vatican deploras Israeli assault on flotilla; priest fears reprisals

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Palestinian women shout slogans during a protest in front of a U.N. building in Gaza City June 1. (CNS photo/Mohammed Sa lem, Reuters)

VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican deplored the "useless loss of life" in an assault by Israeli commandos on a flotilla of ships taking aid to the Gaza Strip.

In a written statement released May 31, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office, called the incident "a very painful event" that church officials were following closely.

In Gaza, the parish priest, Father Jorge Hernandez, said June 1 would be "a day of mourning in the Strip. All of Gaza will stop. There will be demonstrations, some of which are already under way in various parts of the city and throughout Gaza. The climate here is heavy and the risk of an escalation of violence is very real, which is why we are calling for caution and prudence."

At least 10 people were killed when Israeli special forces boarded the ships in the early morning hours May 31 in an attempt to stop the vessels from reaching the Palestinian territory of Gaza. Dozens were wounded in the ensuing fight between Israeli commandos and activists on the ship.

The eight-vessel flotilla, bearing building materials, medications and other aid materials, was formed to try to breach the three-year-old blockade of Gaza enforced by the Israeli military. The commandos raided the ship while it was in international waters.

In his statement, Father Lombardi said: "This is a very painful event, particularly for the useless loss of human life. The situation is being followed in the Vatican with great attention and concern."

He said that the Catholic Church is always opposed to violence "no matter where it comes from" because "it always makes efforts for peaceful solutions more difficult."

Pope Benedict XVI will "constantly reiterate the message of peace," especially on his June 4-6 visit to Cyprus, Father Lombardi said. Pope Benedict is expected to address the difficulties of the Christian communities in the Middle East.

Father Hernandez told the Italian bishops' news agency, SIR, that it was a tragedy that the attacks occurred during the May 29-June 4 World Week for Peace in Palestine and Israel, promoted by the World Council of Churches.

"I do not know how to express our disappointment in such a thing, which should have and could have been avoided," the priest said. "Israel said that it would block every attempt to reach Gaza. Israel has the means to prevent and control these situations. It was not necessary to arrive at the point of killing, and now the risk is that the violence will lead to more violence. There already are people talking about vengeance and reprisals."

The assault received widespread international condemnation. A statement issued by the U.N. Security Council deplored the violence and called for "a prompt, impartial, credible and transparent investigation conforming to international standards."

The Israeli government said that its commandos acted in self-defense and that they were attacked when they boarded the ship via helicopter after the flotilla ignored warnings to change course.

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"The intent of the militants was violent, the methods they employed were violent, and unfortunately, the result was violent," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement. Footage released by the Israeli Defense Forces showed a cache of clubs, knives and bags of marbles which it said was used to attack the commandos, whom it said were armed only with paint guns and personal weapons.

In a statement, the Jerusalem Inter-Church Center condemned "in the strongest language possible the irresponsible actions perpetrated by the Israeli forces against civilian participants of the Freedom Flotilla." It called on people to take action that would see Israel adhere to international norms by ending the siege on Gaza and as well as its military occupation of the Palestinian territories.

"It is only through ending the unjustifiable ongoing military occupation of another people's land that true peace can emerge," they said. "It is tragic that no serious interventions were made from third parties to avoid such a tragic end for a good human action. The result of silence is death."

The United States and many other countries have called for an investigation into the incident. Turkey condemned Israel and recalled its ambassador. The ship in question was Turkish and most of the dead and wounded are apparently Turkish, reports said.

In a May 31 interview with Vatican Radio, Father Hernandez called the attack "a crime that could have been avoided" because, he said, "it was possible to have acted peaceably."

The Israeli of blockade of the Gaza Strip, Father Hernandez said, has produced a situation in which "the lack of nearly any product has made prices soar to the sky. Medicine and other necessary goods are extremely costly. The situation has been getting worse day by day."

He said that he feared an increase of violence in the region as a result of the attack on the ship because "violence begets violence; evidently there will be consequences to this."

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