

Vatican hopes Iraq does not execute Tariq Aziz

Catholic News Service | Oct. 28, 2010

VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican hopes the death penalty will not be carried out against former Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, 74, said the Vatican spokesman.

"The position of the Catholic Church on the death penalty is known," the spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, said Oct. 26, the day the Iraqi high court sentenced Aziz to death by hanging.

"Therefore, it is truly to be hoped that the sentence against Tariq Aziz will not be carried out, precisely in order to favor reconciliation and the reconstruction of peace and justice in Iraq after the great suffering it has undergone," he said.

Father Lombardi said the Vatican might use diplomatic channels to intervene in the case.

The court sentenced Aziz, a Catholic who also served as foreign minister for then-Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, for persecution of Shiite religious parties.

Aziz is currently in prison and in poor health. He has been convicted for his role in the 1992 execution of more than three dozen merchants found guilty of profiteering and for his role in the forced displacement of Kurds in northern Iraq.

Aziz has 30 days to appeal. His Jordan-based lawyer told The Associated Press they were consulting about their next moves.

In an interview with the British branch of Aid to the Church in Need, the Catholic charity for persecuted and other suffering Christians, Syrian Catholic Archbishop Georges Casmoussa of Mosul, Iraq, called the decision to execute Aziz wrong.

"We have to ask to save him," he said. "We have to mount an international appeal calling on the Iraqi government to reverse this decision."

He noted that Mosul residents launched a petition to ask the government to spare the former defense minister, Sultan Hashim Ahmad, and the death sentence is still pending.

"I will be ready to sign a document asking for this decision to be reversed," the archbishop said of Aziz.

Noting that the Iraqi Supreme Court reached its decision based on Aziz's alleged role in "eliminating religious parties," Archbishop Casmoussa said: "Tariq Aziz was not in security, he was a civil minister. Of course he was part of the regime of Saddam, but that does not mean he was responsible for everything that happened."

Aziz, who spoke English fluently, was often the face of Saddam's regime in the 1990s and before the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, when he surrendered to U.S. forces.

In 1998, Aziz traveled to the Vatican and met with Pope John Paul II. Aziz told Rome reporters he gave the pope a letter from Saddam asking the Vatican's help in lifting the U.N.-imposed sanctions on Iraq.

Aziz met with the pope again in 2003, as the Vatican engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity to try to prevent the U.S.-led invasion.

During that same visit to Italy, Aziz was invited by the Franciscan friars in Assisi, to pray at St. Francis' tomb. Many Italians complained that the Franciscans were being used by a man who since 1979 had been the No. 2 official of a regime guilty of serious human rights abuses.

In June 1992, when Iraqi officials refused to renew an agreement that would allow Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity to remain in Baghdad, Chaldean Patriarch Raphael I Bidawid appealed to Aziz, and the nuns were allowed to stay.

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