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Pope appeals for suspension of fighting in Libya

by John Thavis by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI appealed for a suspension of fighting in Libya and the immediate start of a serious dialogue aimed at restoring peace to the North African country.

Speaking at his weekly blessing March 27, the pope said he was increasingly concerned at the news from Libya, where rebels supported by U.S. and European airstrikes have battled the forces of Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi.

"My fear for the safety and well-being of the civilian population is growing, as is my apprehension over how the situation is developing with the use of arms," the pope said.

"To international agencies and to those with political and military responsibility, I make a heartfelt appeal for the immediate start of a dialogue that will suspend the use of arms," he said.

The pope said that in moments of great international tension, there was more urgency for diplomatic efforts that take advantage of "even the weakest sign of openness to reconciliation" among the parties in conflict. Solutions should be "peaceful and lasting," he said.

The pope offered a prayer for "the return of harmony in Libya" and throughout North Africa.

He also expressed concern about the entire region of the Middle East, where episodes of violence and civil unrest were taking place daily. In Syria, more than 50 people were reported killed in anti-government demonstrations in late March.

"My thoughts go to the authorities and citizens of the Middle East.... There, too, the path of dialogue and reconciliation should be chosen for a just and brotherly coexistence," he said.

Earlier in the week, the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, was critical of what it described as "great confusion" among the coalition that was carrying out airstrikes in support of the Libyan rebels. After the United Nations passed a resolution March 17 that said member nations may use "all necessary measures" to protect Libyan civilians, bombing was carried out by U.S., French and British forces.

The Vatican newspaper said France had undertaken the military operation "in haste and without any coordination" with other key members of the international community.

Meeting in Brussels March 27, ambassadors from 28 NATO countries agreed that NATO would take command of the air operations against Gadhafi's forces.

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Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, said the Vatican would send an observer to the international conference on Libya scheduled for March 29 in London. He said Archbishop Antonio Mennini, the apostolic nuncio to Great Britain, would represent the Vatican at the one-day meeting, which was convened to assess the Libyan intervention.

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