

French bishops support counterparts in Egypt, Libya

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A refugee who fled the unrest in Libya shaves a friend's head at a refugee camp near the Libya-Tunisia border March 26. (CNS/Anis Mili, Reuters)

PARIS -- France's bishops have written to church leaders in Egypt and Libya, pledging to back their campaign for democracy and justice.

"You have shown us your aspiration for dignity, respect, justice and democracy for those entrusted to you," said the April 13 letter, signed by six bishops, including the bishop of the armed forces and the head of the French chapter of Pax Christi.

"They need our support so the impetus does not become exhausted. But they also need us to renew our own adherence to these founding values," the letter said.

The French bishops said they had received messages and appeals from Catholic bishops in North African Arab countries during their April 5-8 assembly in Lourdes and had acted out of "direct concern for justice, peace and international solidarity."

"You have shown us your solicitude ... for your people -- we assure you we are bearing this with you in our prayer and engagement," the French bishops said.

"You invite us, faced with the dynamic events in your countries, to pass with you from fear to confidence. We wish to struggle in our own countries against the same fear which paralyzes hope and mortgages the future of the peoples of the southern Mediterranean," they said.

The letter was published as France and Britain pressed for an intensified military campaign against government forces in Libya, where a NATO-led coalition has been launching airstrikes on ground targets and maintaining a no-fly zone to protect civilians from attacks by forces loyal to Moammar Gadhafi.

The letter also followed the April 11 enactment of a law making France the first country in Europe to ban the public wearing of niqabs and burkas. The law also imposes fines and two-year jail sentences for anyone forcing a woman to wear one.

In an April 12 report, France's National Consultative Commission on Human Rights said intolerance and distrust of Muslims had grown in the country, despite a fall in racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic acts.

In an April 12 commentary, the Catholic La Croix daily said that associating Muslims with trouble had been accentuated by the economic recession.

"Intolerance for Muslims is developing all the more because there are no more actors now who embody a discourse of integration," the paper said, adding, "the results will only be seen in years to come."

In an April 8 statement, the Brussels-based commission of European Union bishops' conferences said the popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and other Arab countries represented "a legitimate claim for freedom and human dignity for millions of people," and were "a clear sign of hope" after "decades of diplomatic deadlock and conflicts."

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