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Pope: Aid those fleeing Middle East conflicts

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI called for emergency assistance to thousands of people fleeing the violence and civil strife in North Africa and the Middle East, and he appealed to nations to explore "every possible form of mediation" to bring an end to the conflicts.

He asked the Vatican's coordinating body of church funding agencies for Eastern Catholic churches to "do everything possible" to help the minority Christian populations remain in the region.

The pope's appeal came during a meeting June 24 with the Vatican coordinating body, known by its Italian acronym ROACO. The ROACO assembly was holding its annual general meeting at the Vatican.

Participants were discussing the changes taking place in North Africa and the Middle East as well as how bishops were following up on the special Synod of Bishops for the Middle East in 2010.

The pope said the region of North Africa and the Middle East "is so important for world peace and stability" and he said the events unfolding there were "a source of anxiety throughout the world."

He said his thoughts and prayers were with all those "who are suffering and to those who are trying desperately to escape," often without hope.

"I pray that the necessary emergency assistance will be forthcoming, but above all I pray that every possible form of mediation will be explored, so that violence may cease and social harmony and peaceful coexistence may everywhere be restored, with respect for the rights of individuals as well as communities," the pope said.

He called for "fervent prayer and reflection" so that the church may be able to "read the signs emerging from the present season of toil and tears."

ROACO must continue to support the minority Christians in North Africa and the Middle East as well as reach out to government authorities "to ensure that the priests and Christian faithful can remain in the East where they were born, not as foreigners, but as citizens who bear witness to Jesus Christ," he said.

The pope called for religious freedom in the region, saying all Christians "must be recognized as having equal dignity and true freedom."

Christians in the East also "are called today to promote, without distinction, the good of all humanity," the pope said.

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