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Kidnapped bishops raise fears of Syrian nightmare

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NCR Today

Rome — Rome on Tuesday reacted with alarm to the kidnapping of two Orthodox bishops in Syria, fearing it may mark the beginning of the nightmare scenario: that Syria will become the next Iraq, meaning the next Middle Eastern country where Christians emerge as primary victims of the chaos following the disintegration of a police state.

A Vatican spokesman called the kidnappings "a dramatic confirmation of the tragic situation in which the Syrian people and its Christian community are living."

According to a report from the Asia News agency, the two bishops were stopped at gunpoint by armed men Monday on their way to the city of Aleppo. A catechist traveling with them was shot to death while the two bishops were forced out of the car and taken away.

The prelates involved are the Syriac Orthodox bishop of Aleppo, Msgr. Youhanna Ibrahim, and the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Aleppo and Iskenderun, Msgr. Boulos al-Yaziji. Both are well known in Rome as veterans of ecumenical dialogue with the Catholic church.

The identity of their kidnappers remains unclear, but sources in Syria say kidnapping of Christians has become a growth industry as various armed factions look for ways to fund their activities.

In late February, the website "Ora Pro Siria," operated by Italian missionaries in the country, launched an emergency fundraising appeal it called "Ransom a Christian." According to the website, the going price for a kidnapped priest in Syria at that time was in the neighborhood of \$200,000.

In reaction to Monday's developments, the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Rome-based movement that's long been active both in ecumenism and conflict resolution, launched an appeal for the liberation of the

two bishops and scheduled a prayer service in Rome's Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere.

Meanwhile, Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, who lived in Syria for 30 years prior to being expelled in June for his advocacy of the uprising against President Bashar Assad, issued a reminder on Italian national television that Christians aren't the only ones paying a price.

"There have been churches destroyed, and others, thank God, are still standing," Dall'Oglio said. "What no one talks about is that there have also been so many mosques destroyed ... this violence puts everyone at risk."

This afternoon, Dall'Oglio was scheduled to speak at a previously scheduled panel discussion on Syria at Rome's School of International Political Cooperation and Development.

On Monday, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom issued a warning about the deteriorating situation in Syria.

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"Due to the intensifying conflict between government forces and affiliates supporting Bashar al-Assad's regime and anti-government elements seeking his overthrow," the commission's report said, "the Syrian people have experienced egregious violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief."

The report documents two other cases in which Christian clergy were kidnapped:

- In September 2012, Greek Orthodox priest Fadi Jamil Haddad was found dead outside Damascus, where he had been trying to secure the release of a kidnapping victim.
- In February 2013, Armenian Catholic priest Michel Kayyal and Greek Orthodox priest Maher Mahfouz were kidnapped by a group described as "armed rebels" when the bus they were riding from Aleppo to Damascus was stopped.

This afternoon, the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, released a statement on the kidnappings to Vatican Radio.

"The kidnapping of the two metropolitans of Aleppo ... and the murder of their driver, while they were undertaking a humanitarian mission, is a dramatic confirmation of the tragic situation in which the Syrian people and its Christian community are living," Lombardi said.

"The Holy Father, Pope Francis, has been informed of this new and very grave fact, which is part of the growing violence of recent days, creating a humanitarian emergency of extremely vast proportions," Lombardi said. "He's following these events with deep participation and intense prayer for the health and liberation of the two bishops, so that, with the commitment of all, the Syrian people can finally see effective responses to their humanitarian drama, and realistic hopes of peace and reconciliation can appear on the horizon."

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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