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Syrian priest killed during rebel attack on Franciscan convent

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — A 49-year-old Syrian priest and hermit was killed Sunday, apparently when a group of rebels attacked the Franciscan Convent of St. Anthony in Ghassanieh, a village in the north near the Turkish border.

Franciscan Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the head of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, told Vatican Radio on Monday that Fr. Francois Murad was not a Franciscan, but had taken refuge in the convent when it became clear he was not safe at the Syriac Catholic hermitage he was building nearby.

Syriac Catholic Archbishop Jacques Behnan Hindo of Hassake-Nisibi told Fides, the news agency of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, that Murad "sent me several messages which showed he was aware of living in a dangerous situation and was willing to offer his life for peace in Syria and the world."

Pizzaballa told Vatican Radio that Ghassanieh -- "like other Christian villages -- has been almost completely destroyed and is almost totally abandoned." He said he believes the only people left in Ghassanieh "are the rebels with their families, rebels who are not from Syria and who are extremists."

"The only thing we can do, other than pray for Father Francois and all the victims, is pray that this folly ends soon and that no more weapons are sent to Syria because that would only prolong this absurd civil war," Pizzaballa said.

The Franciscan leader said Syria is a "battleground, and not just between Syrian forces, but also for other Arab countries and the international community. The ones paying the price are the poor, the small and the least, including the Christians."

"The international community must put the brakes on this," he said.

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