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Catholic, Orthodox leaders in Egypt say army is fighting terrorism

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — Speaking on behalf of Catholics in Egypt, Coptic Catholic Patriarch Ibrahim Isaac Sedrak said the violence and unrest in his country are "not a political struggle between different factions, but a war against terrorism."

In a statement Sunday, the patriarch said the country's Catholics strongly support "all state institutions, particularly the armed forces and the police for all their efforts in protecting our homeland."

The violence in Egypt began at dawn Aug. 14 when the Egyptian military and police used bulldozers and tear gas to clear out camps of people protesting the ouster of President Mohammed Morsi in early July. Morsi was supported by the Muslim Brotherhood, which wants Egypt to have an Islamic inspired government.

In addition to the fighting at the camps, mobs began attacking Christian churches, schools and convents, claiming the Christians supported Morsi's ouster.

Yet there also were reports of Muslims forming cordons around Christian churches to protect them from the mobs and of Muslims offering shelter to their Christian neighbors.

Sedrak's statement thanked "our honorable Muslim compatriots who have stood by our side, as far as they could, in defending our churches and our institutions."

The leader of the country's Orthodox community, Coptic Pope Tawadros II, warned those engaging in violence in Egypt that God would judge them for their actions and encouraged the police, the army and "moderate" civilians to remain strong.

The destruction of Christian churches, schools, convents and stores -- "there is nothing humane about these actions," Tawadros said in a message Saturday. "These people have lost their humanity."

"If an attack on a home or public institution is a crime, what about an attack on a house of God?" the Coptic Orthodox leader asked.

"God's punishment is severe," he warned. "Before God you shall be judged according to the deeds your hands have committed."

Still, he said, "even if the hand of evil is torching, killing and destroying, I have full faith that the hand of God is stronger and mightier, and it is the hand that rebuilds."

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The day after the attacks began, Tawadros issued a statement supporting "Egyptian law enforcement, the armed forces, and all of the institutions of the Egyptian people in its confrontation of the violent armed organizations, dark terrorists, both internal and external," who were attacking government offices as well as churches and "terrorizing our citizens, both Coptic and Muslim."

Christian leaders repeatedly pointed out that the Muslim Brotherhood extremists represented about 2 percent of Egypt's population.

As he did Aug. 15, Pope Francis led thousands of people in praying for peace in Egypt when he recited the Angelus on Sunday with visitors in St. Peter's Square.

"We continue to pray for peace in Egypt," he said. "Mary, queen of peace, pray for us."

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