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Vatican continues full-court press on Syria

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Rome — Ahead of the looming Jan. 22 "Geneva 2" summit on Syria, the Vatican under Pope Francis is continuing its full-court press for peace with gestures intended to reach both policy-makers and ordinary people, even involving Italy's premier soccer league "Serie A", more or less the country's equivalent of the NFL, in the effort.

On Monday, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences held a behind-closed-doors conference featuring experts on the region along with global heavyweights such as Columbia professor Jeffrey Sachs and Egyptian statesman Mohamed ElBaradei, the former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

That meeting ended with an appeal for "an immediate cease-fire" and "humanitarian assistance and reconstruction," as well as a call for "all foreign powers ? to stop the flow of arms funding that feed escalation of violence and destruction."

Pointedly, the statement insisted that the Geneva 2 conference "needs to ensure inclusive participation of all parties to this conflict," making specific mention of Iran.

The line signaled a break with American insistence that Iran should be invited to the Geneva summit only if it agrees that any transitional government in Syria must not include President Bashar Assad or his allies, a precondition Tehran has rejected.

In the run-up to the Jan. 13 Vatican conference, some Western diplomats quietly expressed concern that the Vatican seemed to be positioning itself closer to Russia's position on the Syrian conflict rather than that of the United States and the other Western powers, driven in part by perceptions that Syria's Christian leadership sees Assad as a firebreak between them and rising Islamic militancy.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair had been scheduled to attend the Vatican workshop on Syria, but pulled out at the last minute citing a scheduling conflict.

While the Academy of Sciences worked on the level of policy elites, the Pontifical Council for the Family has announced a new initiative aimed at the grassroots ? in this case, the kind of folk in Italy who'll spend much of the weekend of Jan. 18-19 watching soccer.

Last October, the council under Italian Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia announced a project of aid for victims of the conflict in Syria titled "The Families of the World for the Families of Syria." To date, it's provided temporary housing for refugee families and medical care for both children and the elderly. Organizers say they've helped 5,400 Syrian families, representing more than 20,000 people.

This week the council announced that it's enlisted the support of Italy's Serie A, the country's premier soccer league, in trying to raise consciousness. This weekend, banners will be displayed at midfield in the ten stadiums that are hosting home matches, including Rome's Olympic Stadium, reading "Winds of Peace for the Families of Syria."

Jumbo screens in the stadiums will also play a spot with a well-known Italian TV conductor providing voice-over for images of Syrian refugees in camps in Lebanon.

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"The world of sport is not forgetting the painful situation" in Syria, a statement from the Pontifical Council for the Family said. "The game of peace can be won together, with everyone's commitment."

These two initiatives continue what has been an unrelenting engagement in the Vatican on the Syrian conflict, beginning with Francis himself, who called a global day of prayer and fasting for peace on Sept. 7 and personally presided over a four-hour penitential service that evening in St. Peter's Square.

Francis made Syria the first conflict zone to which he made specific reference in his Jan. 13 address to diplomats.

"What is presently needed is a renewed political will to end the conflict," the pope said, expressing hope that the Geneva 2 Conference will supply it.

Syria was also a focal point during the hour and forty minute meeting U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and the Vatican's Secretary of State, Italian Archbishop (and soon-to-be Cardinal) Pietro Parolin on Jan. 14.

Some analysts credit Francis' strong pro-peace stance with helping to stave off a Western military intervention in Syria, and the parties to the conflict seem to recognize the importance of the Vatican's role.

In late December, for instance, a two-person delegation representing the Syrian government delivered a letter for Pope Francis from Assad. The letter was delivered Dec. 28 when the Syrians met at the Vatican with Parolin and Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, the Vatican foreign minister.

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