

Pope warns diplomats on threats to religious freedom

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Benedict XVI on Monday (Jan. 10) decried violence against Christians in the Middle East, Asia and Africa, as well as more subtle "threats to the full exercise of religious freedom" in the secular West.

The pope made his remarks in his annual address to foreign ambassadors to the Vatican. Returning to the theme of his recent message for the World Day of Peace, Benedict focused on religious freedom as the "first of human rights," which he said is widely "violated or denied" around the world.

The pope paid special attention to the Middle East, noting recent attacks on Christians in Iraq and Egypt, and called upon "governments of the region to adopt ... effective measures for the protection of religious minorities."

Much of Iraq's Christian minority has fled the country amid violence following the U.S.-led invasion in 2003; a car bomb outside a Coptic Christian church in Alexandria, Egypt, on New Year's Day killed at least 21 people.

Benedict also lashed out against Pakistan's blasphemy law, which he said "serves as a pretext for acts of injustice and violence against religious minorities." On Jan. 3, the governor of Punjab was killed by a

security guard for supporting changes to the law.

The pope made no explicit reference to Islamist terrorism, which has been widely blamed for the anti-Christian attacks he mentioned in his speech, including bombings in Nigeria which killed 38 people on Christmas Eve.

Following months of tension with China over the communist government's restrictions on Catholic clergy, Benedict was relatively restrained in his reference to a "time of difficulty and trial" for the church there.

The pope was positively friendly to the Communist government of Cuba, voicing hope that its "dialogue happily begun with the church may be reinforced and expanded."

Benedict also warned against the "marginalization of religion, and of Christianity in particular" in the West. He called for a defense of the "right to conscientious objection" by medical professionals who refuse to participate in abortions, and of the right to display religious symbols, such as the crucifix, in public places.

In an apparent reference to recent controversy over the public school curriculum in Spain, Benedict denounced "obligatory participation in courses of sexual or civic education" that contradict church teaching as an "attack on the religious freedom of families."