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Pope deplores latest killings of Christians in Pakistan

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VATICAN CITY
Pope Benedict XVI deplored the killing of eight Christians in Pakistan by a Muslim mob and urged the minority Christian community not to be deterred by the attack.

The Christians, including four women and a child, were either shot or burned alive Aug. 1 when a crowd attacked the eastern Pakistani town of Gojra, setting fire to dozens of Christian homes. Authorities said tensions were running high in the area, fueled by a false rumor that a Quran, the sacred book of Islam, had been desecrated.

A telegram sent in the pope's name said the pontiff was "deeply grieved to learn of the senseless attack" on the Christian community. Noting the "tragic deaths" and the immense destruction in the neighborhood, he sent condolences to the families of the victims and expressed solidarity with the survivors.

"In the name of God he appeals to everyone to renounce the way of violence, which causes so much suffering, and to embrace the way of peace," it said.

The telegram, sent to Bishop Joseph Coutts of Faisalabad, asked the bishop to "encourage the whole diocesan community, and all Christians in Pakistan, not to be deterred in their efforts to help build a society which, with a profound sense of trust in religious and human values, is marked by mutual respect among all its members."

Pakistan has been beset by political and social tensions, including attempts by Muslim militants to impose an intolerant version of Islam. A number of attacks on Christians have occurred in recent years, prompting Catholic leaders to call for constitutional amendments to protect religious minorities.

The latest violence followed several days of rising tensions in the area of Gojra when rumors of the desecration of a Quran were spread by Muslim militants. Pakistani government officials said they had debunked the rumor, but that "anti-state elements" had continued to foment hostilities.

Church-run schools, which were set to reopen in some cities Aug. 3, were closed for three days to mourn the deaths. The government meanwhile appealed for calm and announced an investigation into the attack.

Catholic leaders have said a major factor in interreligious tension is the abuse of Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which severely punish vaguely defined insults to the prophet Mohammed or the Quran. In June, the Pakistani bishops' National Commission for Justice and Peace said the abuse of blasphemy laws had led to the destruction of places of worship and properties of religious minorities.

About 95 percent of Pakistan's 160 million people are Muslim. Less than 2 percent are Christian.

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