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L'OR: Allied govt's did little to stop Holocaust

John Thavis Catholic News Service | Aug. 14, 2009

VATICAN CITY -- In a lengthy article, the Vatican newspaper said the U.S. and British governments had detailed information about the Nazi plan to exterminate European Jews during World War II, but failed to act for many months and even suppressed reports about the extent of the Holocaust.

The newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, contrasted Allied inaction with the quiet efforts undertaken by Pope Pius XII to save as many Jews as possible through clandestine assistance.

The article, published Aug. 13, reviewed historical information in support of an argument frequently made by Vatican experts: While critics have focused on Pope Pius' supposed "silence" on the Holocaust, little attention has been given to documented evidence that the U.S. and British governments ignored or minimized reports of extermination plans.

The article quotes heavily from the diary of Henry Morgenthau Jr., U.S. secretary of the treasury during the war, who said that as early as August 1942 administration officials "knew that the Nazis were planning to exterminate all the Jews of Europe."

Morgenthau cited a telegram dated Aug. 24, 1942, and passed on to the State Department, that relayed a report of Hitler's plan to kill between 3.5 million and 4 million Jews, possibly using cyanide poison. The Vatican newspaper reproduced a copy of the telegram.

Eventually, in early 1944, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt set up the War Refugee Board that was credited with saving tens of thousands of Jewish lives. But for 18 months before then, despite increasingly alarming reports, U.S. officials "dodged their grim responsibility, procrastinated when concrete rescue schemes were placed before them, and even suppressed information about atrocities," Morgenthau wrote.

The Vatican newspaper article also cited a series of State Department orders apparently aimed at preventing reports on Nazi atrocities from reaching the public, which would have increased pressure on the administration for action.

When the U.S. government was finally convinced to begin some efforts to rescue and relocate European Jews, the British government stalled, the article said. It cited a British Foreign Office cable that warned of "the difficulties of disposing of any considerable number of Jews should they be rescued from enemy occupied territory" and advised against allocating any funds for the project.

Morgenthau described this message as "a satanic combination of British chill and diplomatic double talk, cold and correct and adding up to a sentence of death."

The Vatican newspaper said that, while all this was going on, in Nazi-occupied Rome Pope Pius was carrying out "the only plausible and practical form of defense of the Jews and other persecuted people" -- hiding them in various church-run institutions. In the end, although more than 2,000 Jews were deported from Rome and killed,

about 10,000 Jews of Rome were saved, it said.

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