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Pope meets about humanitarian crisis in Libya

Sarah Delaney Catholic News Service | Mar. 2, 2011

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI met with the director of the World Food Program to learn about the humanitarian crisis developing on the border of Tunisia and Libya, said a statement distributed by the Vatican.

In a private audience March 2, the pope was briefed by Josette Sheeran, who, as head of the United Nations agency, had just returned from a trip to the area.

Thousands of people have fled Libya into neighboring Tunisia as forces loyal to Libyan dictator Col. Moammar Gadhafi fight with protesters in the western and eastern parts of the country. Gadhafi's forces have been conducting aerial bombing raids in an effort to repress the protests against his regime, and some observers estimate 2,000 people have died since the protests began in late February.

In a WFP statement released by the Vatican, Sheeran said that the pope had asked her for the meeting in order to be informed and to "express his concern for the innocent people trapped in this terrible tragedy."

Sheeran said, "It was clear to me as I saw these desperate people pour across the border -- more than 2,000 an hour -- that the world must act -- and must act quickly -- to prevent a major humanitarian disaster."

Sheeran said she traveled to the border area to launch an emergency response and provide food assistance, "and to help nations in political transition to strengthen their food safety nets."

She said she was honored to meet the pope and expressed thanks for the "invaluable support he continues to give to our work feeding the hungry around the world."

With the rising price of food affecting millions of people around the world, she said, the support of Catholic institutions is invaluable.

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