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Synod Notebook: Delegation to Syria in doubt

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 22, 2012 NCR Today
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After a weekend of violence in both Syria and Lebanon, plans by the Synod of Bishops to dispatch a delegation to Syria to show support for peace and the country's beleaguered Christian population may be in doubt.

A senior Western ambassador told *NCR* on Monday morning that Sunday, the impression was that the odds of it happening were about "50-50."

Part of the concern is security and logistics. Sources say one plan called for the seven-member delegation, which includes Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, to fly to Beirut, picking up Melkite Patriarch Gregory III Laham, and then to travel to Damascus by car.

Yet Issam Bishara, a representative of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association in Lebanon, told *NCR* this morning by phone from Beirut that the route has been shut down because of Sunni protestors burning tires at several points along the way, outraged by the assassination of General Wissam al-Hassan, the country's intelligence chief and a Sunni Muslim, on Friday.

"If they're still planning to go through Lebanon by car," Bishara told *NCR*, "then I would say don't do it."

Another concern was the delegation's program and the fear that the delegation might be exploited by the Syrian government, led by President Bashar al-Assad, as a propaganda coup.

Meanwhile, another act of violence in Syria on Sunday demonstrated why the country's Christian population needs the kind of reassurance the delegation is intended to deliver. A car bomb went off in the Bab Touma ("Thomas Gate") Square in Damascus, in the heart of the city's Christian center.

One report said that 13 people were killed and 29 injured in the bombing, which Syrian officials attributed to a terrorist group.

Bishara said Syrian Christians see the attack as deliberately directed at them, since the Bab Touma area is "100 percent Christian," with all the country's churches represented in the neighborhood.

Bishara said Syria's 2.3 million Christians, representing 10 percent of the population, are "very worried" about the future.

Saying he lived through the civil war in Lebanon, Bishara described today's situation as eerily similar -- bombings, booby traps, people standing in bread lines and a general sense of uncertainty.

Although stopping the violence is maddeningly complicated, Bishara said in the meantime, the Christians in Syria need help now. They're dispersed in different zones of the country, some under Assad's control, some dominated by the rebel Free Syrian Army, and some gripped by intense fighting.

Notably, Bishara stressed that most displaced Christians have not fled to refugee camps in Turkey and Jordan, where they can be assisted by major international relief efforts. Instead, they've taken refuge with relatives in private homes inside Syria or across the border in Lebanon, making their situation even more precarious.

The Catholic Near East Welfare Association is perhaps the largest coordinator of aid to Syrian Christians, Bishara said, working with all the different Christian churches and religious orders to distribute aid.

"We're moving money into Syria," he said. "Don't ask me how, but it's getting there. We're buying supplies on the Syrian market, which we want to do, and our partners are getting it to the people who need help."

"The needs are enormous," he said. "We can't stop the war, but in the meantime we have an obligation to help these people get through the winter, and to survive in a very difficult time."

Bishara said he hopes the Synod of Bishops finds a way to get its delegation into the country.

"I'm not sure what they can do to help, but all by itself the trip is a good message, showing that the Vatican and the church are really concerned," he said.

"During the civil war in Lebanon, whenever church people would come visit us from the outside, it brought a spirit of hope," he said.

The Catholic Near East Welfare Association has recently launched an emergency appeal to provide 2,000 Christian families in Syria winter survival kits. Information on the effort, including an on-line donation form, can be found here: http://www.cnewa.org/donations.aspx?ID=2423&sitecode=HQ&pageno=1 [1]

Meanwhile, the Synod of Bishops announced Friday the opening of a special account at the Vatican Bank for participants to make contributions for relief in Syria, in addition to a planned contribution by the Vatican itself.

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