

Church leaders on the Middle East crisis: And others

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 28, 2006 All Things Catholic

As a sidebar to the humanitarian mobilization for Lebanon, the German-based Catholic charity, Aid to the Church in Need, released a statement on July 25 saying the number of families affected by the ongoing military clashes to be more than 100,000. The charity said many of these families are taking refuge in Catholic convents and other church buildings.

Melkite Catholic Archbishop Elias Chacour of Akka, Haifa, Nazareth and all of Galilee issued a separate statement saying that Arab Christians in northern Israel have been especially hard-hit by the current round of violence. Many do not have bomb shelters, he said, cannot take refuge in Haifa or other large Israeli cities as easily as Jews, and are denied certain kinds of compensation by the Israeli government.

"I never imagined that a day will come that I have to make an appeal, a kind of SOS for us Christians in Galilee. We wish to wipe away the tears of the children and parents in these difficult times," Chacour said.

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The crisis in Lebanon, driven in significant measure by jihadist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, is also a reminder of the importance of dialogue between the West and the Islamic world.

Recent days, however, have brought fresh reminders of the challenges that dialogue poses.

In Turkey, the Apostolic Vicar for Anatolia, Capuchin Bishop Luigi Padovese, has complained about a drumbeat of anti-Christian commentary in the Turkish press, some focused on Benedict XVI's projected late November visit to Istanbul for a meeting with Patriarch Bartholomew.

Padovese referred to newspaper reports calling on the Holy Father not to pray while visiting the Hagia Sophia, one of Christendom's greatest achievements -- a vast cathedral that was turned into a mosque before becoming a museum.

"The newspaper reports were saying that the pope should remember Hagia Sophia is now a museum, not a place of worship," Padovese said. "They say they will be very critical of him if he starts praying there."

In Australia, Cardinal George Pell of Sydney in recent weeks has openly expressed concern with what he sees as tendencies towards violence and extremism in the Quran, the sacred scripture of Islam. One place he voiced those concerns was in this space: [June 6, 2006](#) [1]

In response, the president of the Islamic Information and Services Network in Australia, Abu Hamza, has called Pell a "clown" and alleged that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, was full of murder and seemed to

condone rape.

"This ignorant man does not know Christianity, let alone Islam," Hamza said in a sermon.

From Rome, Pell replied: "I am not sure how much Mr. Hamza's comments improve the situation, but there are no teachings of Jesus, unlike Mohammed, which advocate violence against followers of other religions."

All this is a reminder of how complex, and potentially explosive, things can become when dialogue between Christians and Muslims moves beyond the "tea and cookies" stage and gets down to brass tacks.

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