NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Church leaders on the Middle East crisis: Sodano

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

Apparently unfazed by criticism that his comments ?deploring? the Israeli incursion into Lebanon amounted to a form of moral equivalence between terrorism and legitimate self-defense, Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano continued to speak out this week.

In an interview with the Italian magazine *Famiglia Cristiana*, Sodano said that an international force for Lebanon, an idea embraced by Wednesday?s Rome summit, ?could be opportune,? but only on the condition that it have ?the necessary instruments to intervene.?

?The recent history of some of these U.N. forces is not encouraging,? Sodano said. ?It?s enough to think of the lethargy of these forces in some painful situations in the Balkans, in Africa, or in Haiti or East Timor. Still today there?s a U.N. force, Unifil, between Lebanon and Israel, but it was not able to stop the current conflict.?

?What is needed,? Sodano said, ?is the will to peace on the part of governments and the governed. For this reason the church, and in particular the Holy See, will never tire of inviting the parties to dialogue, in order to find paths of understanding and reconciliation.?

Sodano said it?s a duty for Christians ?to stop the inhumanity of war, as a true degeneration of humanity.?

The cardinal acknowledged that ?the right to a legitimate self-defense cannot be denied to states.? At the same time, however, Sodano said the ?*ius in bello*,? meaning the law of rightful conduct of a war, ?must be remembered ? above all for not drawing innocent civilians? into the conflict.

?Humanitarian law is a conquest of our civilization, and it may never be violated,? he said.

Responding to criticism that his earlier comments were unfair to Israel, Sodano said that the line of the Vatican ?in all the conflicts of the past century, and in those at the beginning of this one, has always been that of favoring the arguments for peace. It?s a line that sometimes can displease one or another of the belligerent parties, but it is born from the desire to be faithful to the mission in the world that Christ entrusted to the church.?

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Reaction to Sodano?s initial take on the conflict continued to roll in this week.

Catholic writer Joseph Bottum, in *The Weekly Standard*, said Sodano?s denunciation of Israel reflected a cynical political calculus he finds all too common in Vatican statements on the Middle East: ?Supporting Israel risked the murder of Christians in Islamic countries; supporting the Arabs risked a stern note from the Israeli

ambassador,? he wrote.

Meanwhile, Italian Bishop Rino Fisichella, rector of the Lateran University and a close advisor to Benedict XVI, published an opinion piece in *Corriere della Sera*, Italy?s most prestigious daily newspaper, on July 22 that read a bit like a ?correction? of Sodano?s line, in the form of an interpretation of Benedict?s comments on the conflict to date.

?Between the act of self-defense to which every government is obliged in order to protect its citizens, and the attack of terrorist groups of various stripes with the common denominator of refusing to recognize Israel, the voice of the pope was in favor of the Jewish people,? Fisichella wrote.

?From this point of view, there?s no *sede vacante*, and for anyone with eyes to see or ears to hear, the voice of Benedict XVI has been, from the very beginning, clear and unequivocal,? Fisichella wrote.

?The Jewish people necessarily must live together with the Palestinians and the Lebanese, in the maturity of the democratic process that the nations have acquired, but it must be equally clear that situations of collaboration with any terrorist group cannot be permitted,? he said.

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Source URL (retrieved on *09/18/2014 - 13:08*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/church-leaders-middle-east-crisis-sodano