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Italian official says 'it seems' Italian Jesuit was kidnapped in Syria

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After more than a week with no word from Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, an Italian priest who worked for decades in Syria, Italian Foreign Minister Emma Bonino said, "it seems he has been kidnapped by an Islamist group" that is a "local version of al-Qaida," the terrorist group.

Bonino made her comments Tuesday on an Italian television news program. The foreign ministry has been trying to figure out what happened to the Jesuit since he last spoke to friends in late July, saying he was returning to Syria. The Reuters news agency had reported that militants with links to al-Qaida kidnapped the priest July 29 while he was walking in the northern Syrian city of al-Raqqah.

Fr. Victor Assouad, provincial superior of the Jesuits in the Middle East, issued a statement Monday saying Jesuits in the region were "deeply worried" about both Dall'Oglio and Dutch Jesuit Fr. Frans van der Lugt, a longtime resident of Syria who is in the besieged city of Homs and has been offering shelter to those fleeing the fighting.

Assouad thanked those trying to find Dall'Oglio and prayed that "this ordeal will come to an end soon." He also asked the international community to do everything possible to protect Van der Lugt and his guests. The Jesuits are committed to pursuing their humanitarian action and renew their intention to "work for peace and reconciliation in Syria," the provincial said.

In a statement released by the Vatican on Saturday, Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches, pledged his prayers to the Jesuits and all those who were worried about "the continuing uncertainty about the situation" of Dall'Oglio.

At the same time, Sandri expressed concern over the "absolute silence" that hangs over the fate of the two Orthodox bishops kidnapped in Syria April 22 and the Armenian Catholic and Greek Orthodox priests kidnapped in February.

Pope Francis also offered prayers for Dall'Oglio during a Mass in Rome with his Jesuit confreres July 31, the feast of St. Ignatius.

Dall'Oglio was well-known and very well-respected in Syria, even though he may have held "positions that not everyone shared," Archbishop Mario Zenari, the Vatican nuncio to Syria, had told Vatican Radio July 30.

The Jesuit reportedly supported the rebel insurrection against President Bashar Assad. Dall'Oglio was expelled by Syrian authorities in June 2012 for reportedly helping people injured by government crackdowns.

The Jesuit had been based in Syria for 30 years, and since 1982 had been restoring an ancient monastery in the desert and forming a religious community dedicated to Christian-Muslim dialogue and harmony.

Zenari described Dall'Oglio as "a man of virtue, a Jesuit of great talent and a person who loves Syria."

In an interview with Catholic News Service in July 2012, Dall'Oglio said Christian-Muslim conflict had been avoided in Syria "because of the culture and deep religious convictions of the people. It is the result of a deep faith. Believing Christians and believing Muslims live well together."

Unfortunately, he said, "globalization is taking this tradition of harmony from the local society. There has been a globalization of tension" with religious fanatics spreading their hatred, a process that is using the conflict and chaos created by the attempt to oust Assad.

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