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Vatican embassy in Syria hit, damaged by mortar strike

Carol Glatz Catholic News Service | Nov. 5, 2013
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A mortar round hit the apostolic nunciature in the Syrian capital, causing limited damage to the building and no causalities because of the early hour of the strike, said the Vatican ambassador to Syria.

Archbishop Mario Zenari, the Vatican nuncio, told Vatican Radio on Tuesday that if the rocket had been launched just a half-hour later, he would have been saying morning prayers on the terrace near where the mortar struck.

"You can imagine what I would have encountered," he said.

He told the radio that he was just getting out of bed at 6:35 a.m. local time "when I heard a big bang and I immediately threw myself onto the floor, trying to stay away from the windows because we've already had the experience that sometimes it's not just one mortar, but two or three" that land in succession.

"It's not the first time that these rockets, this mortar fire, have fallen near the nunciature," he said.

The single strike Tuesday destroyed part of the roof, including the eaves of the building and part of the facade, the archbishop told the Rome-based AsiaNews agency.

If the strike had occurred later in the morning, after other employees had arrived at the nunciature, it could have provoked injuries because of the falling roof shingles and flying debris, he said.

Zenari said they had no idea who launched the strike, but that it was "pretty powerful."

Sometimes the mortar lands where it was targeted; other times the rockets land where they do "by mistake," he said.

"I have to say, unfortunately, that these things happen every day" and few areas in the city are spared, he said. For example, a Franciscan monastery in Aleppo was damaged Saturday by mortars and the Christian quarter in Damascus sees mortar fire "with a certain frequency."

One densely inhabited suburb near the capital, he said, has been hit by 2,800 mortar shells since the start of the conflict nearly three years ago as rebels try to oust Syrian President Bashar Assad.

"Therefore, we're all in the same boat, in Damascus and in other parts of the country," the archbishop said.

Whenever mortar fire hits, he said, he always thinks about what the nation's children are going through. If the attacks make him scared, he can only imagine what the children are experiencing, especially when so many experience much worse, like "seeing homes collapse on top of them, having to flee because their home or village was destroyed," he said.

The archbishop said there is growing concern among the country's Christians. In the beginning of the conflict, the Christian minority was still "respected," but lately their situation has become "a bit worrying."

However, all Syrians are worried, not just the Christians, he added.

Zenari said the international community and Syria's warring sides "have to really double their efforts" to come up with a political solution to the crisis.

"It's not so much an uphill struggle, but it seems that in these conditions is almost a cliff, like climbing a wall" to get a negotiated solution.

The world community and Syrian powers need to do everything possible "because the people are suffering, they are dying every day, they are leaving their villages, homes are destroyed daily, there are refugees and people displaced every day," he said.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in July that more than 100,000 people had been killed in the Syrian civil war.

U.S. government officials estimate that almost one-third of Syria's 22 million people have been displaced by the civil war, including an estimated 2 million who have fled the country and about 5 million who have been forced from their homes but remain in Syria.

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