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Pope Francis continues to denounce use of chemical weapons

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 27, 2013
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Pope Francis on Friday met with Ahmet Üzümcü, director general of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and issued what Vatican Radio described [1] as a strong call for a "compact rejection of this type of armament."

Based in The Hague, Netherlands, the organization is an intergovernmental body devoted to verifying adherence to international conventions banning chemical weapons and verifying their destruction. Among other things, the group currently has inspectors in Syria trying to verify the elimination of chemical weapons by the government of President Bashar Assad.

Üzümcü is a career Turkish diplomat who previously served in his country's consulate in Aleppo, Syria, a city particularly devastated by that country's ongoing civil war. Francis received him Friday morning in a brief audience.

According to the Vatican Radio account of the meeting, Pope Francis repeated his firm denunciation of the use of chemical weapons, first pronounced in an Angelus address [2] of Sept. 1, and affirmed that "these armaments have no place in the world."

"The international community must continue its efforts to eliminate them and to ensure that they can't ever reemerge," the pope told Üzümcü, according to Vatican Radio.

According to the account, Francis expressed support for making adherence to conventions against chemical weapons universal and said "chemical science should be utilized only for pacific ends in service to humanity."

Aside from basic humanitarian motives, the meeting with Üzümcü also served a political purpose for the pope, who unleashed a full-court diplomatic press [3] in the Vatican this month against the idea of a Western military intervention in Syria.

At the time, some critics accused the Vatican and the pope of playing down the brutality of the Assad regime, in particular charges Assad had used chemical weapons against his own people.

Friday's meeting, therefore, allowed Francis to symbolically make the point that opposing an expanded conflict in Syria is not tantamount to defending Assad or excusing the use of chemical weapons.

The Holy See has a formal relationship with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons through the pope's nuncio, or ambassador, to the Netherlands, French Archbishop André Pierre Louis Dupuy.

The Vatican has long taken stands against the use of chemical weapons as part of a broader current in Catholic social teaching that says the use of force can only be just if, among other things, it distinguishes between combatants and civilian populations.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that "every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man, which merits firm and

unequivocal condemnation," adding that modern war "provides the opportunity to those who possess modern scientific weapons -- especially atomic, biological, or chemical weapons -- to commit such crimes."

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