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Italian prime minister: Syria resolution 'the most beautiful sign that could come'

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Before last week's meeting of the United Nations in New York, the international political system stood "one step from the abyss" over a potential U.S. attack in Syria, Italy's prime minister said Sunday.

Even so, an agreement between the members of the U.N. Security Council over a resolution requiring Syria to dismantle its chemical weapons is a sign the body "is back at the center of international politics," Enrico Letta said.

"This is perhaps the most beautiful sign that could come," said Letta, who has led a fragile coalition in Italy's parliament since April.

"We were one step from the abyss," he said. "From my role, I can tell you what it means that the whole international community was a step from the abyss. But words of hope and dialogue prevailed."

Letta made his comments during a summit hosted by the Community of Sant'Egidio, an Italian-based, Catholic lay association that has tens of thousands of members in 70 countries. The summit, being held Sunday through Tuesday at venues throughout Rome, focused on interreligious dialogue and ecumenism.

The Italian prime minister spoke at the summit's opening, held about a block east of St. Peter's Basilica, along with representatives of the city of Rome, the Italian province of Lazio and the Vatican.

Letta said Pope Francis has shown the world the "power of hope" against a "globalization of indifference."

Francis has referred to such a globalization several times, especially in the context of how global political leaders treat questions of immigration into their countries.

Letta encouraged participants in the summit to recognize that "peace is not naivety."

"Peace is strong," he said. "It is fleeing from responsibility that is cynicism. Peace is not to let oneself go to hopelessness."

Sant'Egidio has held the summit every year since October 1986 as an annual follow-up to Pope John Paul II's interreligious day of prayer in Assisi. This year, the summit will include 32 panel discussions on topics including dialogue between Christians and Muslims in places like Iraq and Nigeria, the possibility of a global system of governance, and how cities around the world are planned and arranged.

The summit begins something of a peace week for the Vatican: a number of prominent cardinals and archbishops will lead or partake in a wide range of panel discussions.

Additionally, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace will host its own summit Wednesday through Friday on the 50th anniversary of Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*.

The 68th General Assembly of the U.N. opened Sept. 17 in New York and continues this week. The countries in the 15-member Security Council also met privately to discuss efforts to deal with suspected Syrian use of chemical weapons. The council voted unanimously Friday to demand the eradication by Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime of all its chemical weapons along the lines of a deal reached by U.S. and Russian counterparts that calls for the international community to verify the weapons' destruction through next year.

Letta, who spoke Sunday as news reports said his coalition government might be falling apart because of political machinations by Italy's former prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, said the U.N. meeting showed that "threads of peace are being knotted again in the world in scenarios where terror and further elements of war was leading us to the most severe tragedy."

Also present at the opening of the summit were dozens of cardinals and bishops. Cardinal Agostino Vallini, who as vicar general for the Rome diocese essentially serves as the city's bishop in Pope Francis' place, spoke at the event on the Vatican's behalf.

Appealing to those attending the summit to work for "profound change," Vallini said the global economic international system "has reached an undeniable crisis."

"People no longer speak of a people, but of individuals that use the Internet without knowing each other," Vallini said. Those who control financial capital around the world, he said, "control the flow of capital without revealing themselves, without knowing each other."

"Our time newly needs positive messages that contrast pessimism and distrust," Vallini said. Ending his remarks, he asked those attending the summit to work toward a "great alliance of peace."

Also speaking at the event Sunday was Jeffrey Sachs, the American economist who serves as a special adviser to U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Sachs, director of The Earth Institute at Columbia University, asked the attendees to focus on reducing global child poverty and on pushing for use of sustainable energy sources.

Citing a Sept. 27 report from the U.N.-created Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that said the last three decades had been the hottest in 1,400 years, Sachs said humanity now has "the power to undermine all forms of human life through environmental devastation."

Worldwide, Sachs said, cities need to develop "new designs of urban settlements based on sunlight and wind."

"There is no standing still," Sachs said. "Because standing still is not sustainable. Because we are in fact rushing forward to self-destruction."

Among Vatican and church officials taking part in the Sant'Egidio summit are Cardinal Antonio Vegliò, the president of the pontifical council for migrants; Cardinal John Onaiyekan, the archbishop of Abuja, Nigera; and Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Vegliò was to speak Monday afternoon on a panel on integrating immigrants along with Suzan Cook, the U.S. ambassador-at-large for religious freedom. Onaiyekan was to speak on a similar panel with several Muslim leaders on Christian-Muslim dialogue. Koch was to speak on a panel on Christian unity with Anglican, Protestant and Orthodox leaders.

The meeting of the Vatican's own Council for Justice and Peace held later this week is meant to assess in current

decades the impact of the 1963 encyclical, which criticized nuclear deterrence and called for greater international dialogue.

That meeting will include addresses from Cardinal Peter Turkson, the council's prefect; the co-presidents of the global Catholic peace group Pax Christi International; Joseph Deiss, the Swiss politician who led the U.N. General Assembly from 2010-11; and Irina Bokova, director-general of UNESCO.

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