

Pope laments 'slaughter' in Iraq

In 'Urbi et Orbi' message, Benedict voices concern for Afghan, African woes

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VATICAN CITY - In his Easter message on Christianity's most joyous day, Pope Benedict XVI on Sunday decried suffering in the world, lamenting the "continual slaughter" in Iraq and expressing worry over unrest and instability in Afghanistan.

"In the Middle East, besides some signs of hope in the dialogue between Israel and the Palestine Authority, nothing positive comes from Iraq, torn apart by continual slaughter as the civil population flees," Benedict told tens of thousands of faithful in St. Peter's Square.

Delivering his traditional "Urbi et Orbi" Easter address from the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica as tens of thousands of pilgrims and tourists listened in the square, the pontiff noted "how many wounds, how much suffering there is in the world."

Benedict read out a litany of troubling current events, saying he was thinking of the "terrorism and kidnapping of people, of the thousand faces of violence which some people attempt to justify in the name of religion, of contempt for life, of the violation of human rights and the exploitation of persons."

He singled out what he called the "catastrophic, and sad to say, underestimated, humanitarian situation" in Darfur as well as other African places of suffering, including violence and looting in Congo, fighting in Somalia — which, he said, drove away the prospect of peace — and the "grievous crisis" in Zimbabwe, marked by crackdowns on dissidents, a disastrous economy and severe corruption.

Benedict said only a negotiated solution could end the drawn-out, bloody conflict in Sri Lanka, and said East Timor needs reconciliation ahead of elections.

Easter greetings

Earlier he celebrated Easter Sunday Mass on the flower-adorned steps of St. Peter's Basilica.

The voices of Choir boys rang across the square. Wearing gold-colored vestments, the pope gripped a slender, silver crucifix as clerics sprinkled incense across the steps. The altar area was ablaze with color — red tulips, orange tiger lilies and yellow broom plants were among the flowers delivered from the Netherlands — and at the end of the service the pope thanked the Dutch for the gift.

Benedict ended his appearance by giving Easter greetings in dozens of languages, including Arabic and Hebrew, and giving the crowd his apostolic blessing.

The Vatican said that TV outlets in 67 countries had arranged satellite links for the Easter service.

The boulevard leading from the Tiber River to the square was filled with numerous languages and tourists, toting backpacks and wearing hats against the sunshine, headed toward the Mass site.

After Sunday's events, Benedict heads to the papal summer residence at Castel Gandolfo, in the Alban Hills south of Rome, for a few days of rest.

When he returns to Rome, Benedict has two important dates on his calendar: his 80th birthday on April 16, and the second anniversary of his election as pope three days later.

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