

POPE BENEDICT SPEAKS OUT ON LEBANON - AGAIN
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PINE BLUFFS – Continuing a long-standing papal practice of diplomacy on the world scene (see my article; *Pope Benedict Continues Predecessor's Impact*, Wyoming Catholic Register 5/16/07), Pope Benedict XVI spoke out strongly in May regarding the unfortunate situation in the tiny democracy of Lebanon.

A country torn by fifteen-years of bloody civil war from 1975 through 1990 that pitted Muslims against Christians – including Maronites affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Greek Catholics, which make up 40% of Lebanon's population - and left an estimated 150,000 dead, Lebanon had enjoyed an uneasy "peace" for almost two decades. But during that time, its much larger neighbor to the northeast, Syria, expanded its influence over the fledgling democracy, and the terrorist organization, Hezbollah, backed by Iran, took advantage of a weak and under-equipped Lebanese army and set up a base of operations in the south from which the Lebanese government had been reluctant to eject it.

On Wednesday, May 7, heavy fighting broke out in the capital of Beirut between government supporters and Hezbollah-led opposition. Explosions were heard throughout the city as both factions fired machine guns, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades at each other. By Sunday, May 11, fighting had spread to the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli and, according to reports, more than 60 people had already died in the worst sectarian violence in years.

After praying the Regina Caeli with thousands in St. Peter's Square on Sunday, May 11, Pope Benedict entered this high-stakes game, urging the Lebanese in a speech reported on zenit.org and in africasia.com, to abandon violence so the nation could be an example of peaceful coexistence for the world. Couching his remarks in diplomatic language, Benedict expressed his hopes for a peaceful Lebanon and said he'd been following the situation "with great concern in recent days, where verbal initiatives have stalled, verbal violence and then armed confrontations followed, with many dead and wounded."

Referring to deployment of the Lebanese army into Beirut, the Pope said: "Even if in these last hours the tensions have slackened, I believe that it is a duty today to exhort the Lebanese to abandon every argument for aggressive opposition that would cause their country irreparable damage."

He continued: "Dialogue, mutual understanding and the search for reasonable compromise are the only way to restore to Lebanon its institutions, and to the people, the necessary security for a daily life that is dignified and rich in hope for tomorrow." However, despite this well-meaning prayerful initiative and a return to troubled calm in the capital, Druze Lebanese, the largest political party in Lebanon's parliament, came under attack in the District of Aley southeast of the Lebanese capital, from Shi'ite Hezbollah fighters later that Sunday afternoon. This prompted growing fears among Christians, Sunni Arabs, and Druze, that Hezbollah militia was attempting to take over the entire country.

"The government, the prime minister [Faud Siniora], and the democratic forces are in grave danger and being attacked by Hezbollah forces. They've taken Beirut. They've burned the newspaper and closed the television," an unnamed Druze source told the *Washington Times* on Tuesday, May 13. Druze leader, Walid Jumblatt, a ruling bloc member, urged his Druze rival Talal Arsian, allied with the Hezbollah opposition, to place the area under army rule. Making a point reminiscent of Pope Benedict's own earlier that day, Jumblatt said, "Civil peace and halting the destruction are paramount."

Taking him at his word, the Lebanese army, which had pulled back its troops from Beirut's center, moved into the area, attempting to assert control. However, after five days of intense fighting, a parliamentary vote to elect a new Lebanese president scheduled for Tuesday, May 12, was postponed until June by Speaker Nabih Berri because of the volatility of the situation. On June 10, a twentieth attempt will take place by feuding politicians to pick a new head of state to replace pro-Syrian Emile Lahoud, who quite back in November 2007 at the end of his term with no successor and serious divisions between the Western-backed government and Hezbollah opposition.

For the past 16 months, following a wave of assassinations (see my article, *Lebanon: Why is it Important?* on Anthonyjsaccosr.townhall.com), the country has been gripped in political stalemate between the ruling coalition and Hezbollah over the make-up of the government. President Bush, scheduled to fly to the Middle East beginning on May 12 to address the Israeli legislature, will discuss the Lebanon crisis as well as other Middle East issues. "It's critical that the international community come together to assist the Lebanese people in their hour of need," he said. "The international community will not allow the Iranian and Syrian regimes, via their proxies, to return Lebanon to foreign domination and control. I strongly condemn Hezbollah's recent efforts to use violence and intimidation to bend the government and people of Lebanon to their will."

Meanwhile, Secretary of State Condi Rice weighed in: "Hezbollah fighters should not be in the streets. There is a legitimate government of Lebanon, and

we are working with others to support and sustain it." She lauded Arab League foreign ministers rejection of militia attacks in Lebanon as "clearly illegitimate" and their convening of an emergency meeting in Cairo. Rice said she'd participate in a conference call on the crisis with a dozen other top diplomats from Europe and the Middle East.

These same Arab ministers said after their Cairo talks that they'd send a high-level delegation to Beirut headed by Arab League Secretary General Amr Mussa, to attempt an end to the deadlock gripping Lebanon. Their aim was to bring together three opposition leaders - parliament speaker Nabih Berri, Christian leader Michel Aoun, and Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah - with present parliamentary majority leader Saad Hariri and a former president, Amin Gamayal, father of Pierre Gamayal, who was assassinated in 2006.

According to a BBC News report on May 15, 2008 "the army has emerged as the only factor preventing complete collapse and it is generally agreed that its commander, General Michel Suleiman, should be the next president."

Benedict's diplomatic move is merely the latest of his attempts to improve the Lebanese murky political situation. In July 2006, Hezbollah had taken over a large refugee camp in Lebanon and set up bases in the southern portion of that country from which it daily launched rocket attacks into Israel. The Lebanese army, aided by a shipment of arms from the United States, reluctantly moved into the refugee camp and drove Hezbollah fighters out, even as Israel sent troops into southern Lebanon to dislodge Hezbollah. Pope Benedict decried both Hezbollah terrorism and Israeli military reactions during his Angelus audience on Sunday, July 16, 2006, saying: "Neither acts nor reprisals – especially when they have such tragic consequences for the civilian population – can be justified." Earlier, he had expressed his wish that the Middle East could be freed from religious, cultural, historical, and geographical discrimination, so that the region "can finally enjoy peace."

His efforts have been unappreciated by Muslim hardliners, among them Anjem Choudary, a notorious Muslim extremist apparently backed by exiled British Muslim cleric, Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed, who told a demonstration outside Westminster Cathedral in London on September 18, 2006 that "the Pope must die." One wonders what it will take before the British crack down on this sort of thing. Inflammatory speech of that sort should not be legal.

The Pope's reply? "May Lebanon, through the intercession of Our Lady of Lebanon, know how to respond with courage to its vocation of being, for the Middle East and the whole world, a sign of the real possibility of constructive and peaceful coexistence among people."

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