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"Mass Grave Discovery" in Turkey as Pope Continues Tense Trip

By Stefan J. Bos

ISTANBUL, TURKEY — Pope Benedict XVI continued his tense trip to Turkey Wednesday, November 29, amid reports of the discovery of a mass grave allegedly containing remains of mainly Christian Assyrians and Armenians.

The mass grave in south eastern Turkey was believed to date from the 1915-1917 genocide of an estimated 1.5 million Assyrians, Armenians and Hellenic Christians, said the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA) to BosNewsLife.

Turkey has both denied these figures or involvement by Turkish Ottoman in mass murder. However at least a dozen countries have recognized the genocide.

AINA, which also operates website www.aina.org said last month, October 17, villagers from Xirabebaba, also known as Kuru, in south eastern Turkey "came across a mass grave when digging a grave for one of their deceased."

Swedish Experts

It was not immediately clear how many bodies were believed to have been buried there. AINA said Sweden is considering to send special experts to the region.

The news agency, which has become a voice of the Assyrian churches, quoted local Christians as saying that the Turkish military have sealed off the area, forbidding villagers and journalists to report more details.

News of the mass grave came as the leader of the world's estimated 1.1 billion Catholics already struggled to overcome tensions over his recent remarks regarding Islam and to call for more respect for the rights of Christians.

On Wednesday, November 29, Pope Benedict XVI held a Mass on at one of the most famous Christian places in Turkey as part of his efforts to reach out to the Roman Catholic minority in a mostly Muslim country.

Open-Air Mass

The pontiff conducted the open-air Mass in the area of Ephesus near a house of Mary, who the Bible says gave birth to Jesus while still being a virgin. Ephesus is also an important town for early Christianity as Apostle Paul is believed to have used it as a base.

Underscoring the sensitivity of the pope's trip, security forces had sealed off the area and only about 250 people reportedly attended the event, making it one of the smallest crowds to attend a papal Mass.

The pontiff was then to travel to Istanbul where he will spend the remainder of his four-day visit as the guest of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, seen as the spiritual head of the world's 250 million Orthodox Christians.

Benedict XVI's trip was originally meant just as a visit to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul to try to bring the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches closer as there are some 100,000 Christians in Turkey.

Easing Tensions

But the pope's journey is now aimed at easing tensions, following his recent comments over Islam which added to concern among Christians in Turkey and neighboring Iraq of more militant attacks against them.

In a September 12 lecture at Regensburg University in Germany, the Pope quoted 14th-century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus, who wrote that Prophet Mohammad had brought things "only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."

The pope said faith had to be joined with reason, a link he implied that Islam lacked. Two days later, Turkey's top religious official Ali Bardakoglu said Benedict XVI should apologize for comments and reconsider his plans to visit Turkey.

On September 16, the pope said he was deeply sorry Muslims had been offended by his use of a mediaeval quotation but also made clear he was saddened for the reactions in some countries to his few remarks.

Nun Killed

But the next day, gunmen killed an Italian nun in Somalia, an attack many assumed was linked to protests against the pope. Rosa Sgorbati

worked in a pediatrics hospital in Somalia under her religious name Sister Leonella was killed in Mogadishu by suspected Islamic militants.

Some other deadly attacks in Iraq have also been linked to the comments. Speaking on Tuesday, November 28, the pope, who is making his first papal trip to a predominantly Muslim nation, said dialogue is needed so that different religions come to know each other better and respect one another.

"We are in great need of authentic dialogue between religions and between cultures, capable of assisting us, in a spirit of fruitful cooperation, to overcome all the tensions together," he said, after meeting Muslim and other officials.

He also stressed the need for all citizens to be guaranteed the right to freedom of worship and freedom of conscience. Some commentators have already said they doubt whether it will be ever possible for a the pope to reconcile Islam with Christianity.

Efforts Questioned

The pope's efforts were questioned in a comment on the website of the Washington Post newspaper written by R. Albert Mohler Jr. president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the flagship school of the Southern Baptist Convention, one of the world's largest seminaries.

"Simply, the Pope's visit to Turkey—along with the media attention and hype—is further evidence that the mixing of temporal and spiritual authority will not work," he wrote.

"A minister of Christ should speak clearly about the Gospel and about the reality of Islam."

Mohler Jr. said that the "central Christian concern about Islam should not be the undeniable threat of Islamic violence but the fact that Islam is incompatible with the Gospel of Christ." He said, "Islam explicitly denies what Christians centrally affirm—that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God who came to save his people from their sins."

Mohler Jr. stressed that the , "most significant challenge posed by Islam is not geopolitical...but spiritual. I do not expect Benedict XVI to say this in Turkey."

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