



**Adoring crowd:** Pope Benedict XVI, wearing a traditional Mexican sombrero, is greeted by thousands as he arrives Sunday at Bicentennial Park in Silao, Mexico.

## Papal visit spreads hope in Havana

By Girish Gupta  
Special for USA TODAY

HAVANA — As downtown Havana prepares for its first papal visit in 14 years, Manuel Olivera, 48, sits playing chess outside his colorful yet faded home in the immense heat of the central city.

"The pope won't change this country's politics," he said. "Only the people can change the politics."

Benedict XVI is set to land in Cuba today for what will be a delicate exercise in diplomacy between the country's dissidents, who are anxious for their voices to be amplified by a papal visit, and the historically atheist government that is in need of an air of legitimacy.

The pope was in Mexico on Sunday, where he addressed hundreds of thousands of worshipers in an open-air Mass.

On his flight Friday from the Vatican to Mexico, Benedict offered some hope to the dissidents.

"Today it is evident that Marxist ideology in the way it was conceived no longer corresponds to reality," he said, adding that he was ready to help Cuba find new ways of moving for-

### Benedict XVI says he's ready to help Communist Cuba move forward

ward. "New models must be found with patience and in a constructive way."

Told of the pope's comments, Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez said, "We will listen with all respect to His Holiness."

Last weekend, 70 members of dissident group *Las Damas de Blanco* (The Ladies in White) — protesting on behalf of political prisoners — were arrested as they marched in Havana.

"We only want a minute to communicate with" the pope, Berta Soler, leader of the group, said, adding that many of them had been beaten before their release. "We are marginalized, oppressed, and the church must hear and protect us."

The Ladies in White marched again Sunday at the Santa Rita church on Havana's 5th Avenue. This time, they did so in front of the world's news media and were not arrested.

Priest José Pérez Riera, inside the church, said that a politicization of any visit by the pope was inevitable.

"It's important for us to conserve the meaning of the trip," he said. "The pope is the pastor of the church, presenting Christ to the world."

The Communist Party newspaper *Granma* dismissed the Ladies in White as "mercenaries of the (U.S.) empire."

"What happened to the Ladies in White is not an aberration," said Nik Steinberg, a researcher for Human Rights Watch. "There are thousands of arbitrary detentions like it every year, which represent one of the government's most effective tactics to silence its critics."

Dissidents have also complained of threats from authorities. Oswaldo Payá claims that members of his Christian Liberation Movement have received threats from state security, banning them from taking part in papal ceremonies. He was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 and is one of the country's foremost dissidents.

"The government is kidnapping the visit of the pope," he said. "It's a thea-

ter. The government, with all its mechanisms of repression, is pushing a culture of fear, and there's a lot of pressure on the local church not to denounce what's happening."

The trip comes 14 years after a visit by Pope John Paul II, when he promised religious tolerance in a country where Roman Catholicism has been severely repressed.

The government expelled priests and nuns as well as seized church property after the revolution in 1959. Religious people were banned from the Communist Party, and Christmas was only reinstated as a national holiday in preparation for the last papal visit.

There are no plans for Fidel Castro to meet with the pope, though Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi said that the pope would be available if Castro — who was excommunicated by Pope John XXIII in 1962 — desired an audience.

Support for Cuban authorities still remains strong in many parts of Havana. Pointing toward a picture of Castro on the faded green wall behind him, 45-year-old butcher Ismael Camacho proudly proclaims, "This is our pope."

## France hands down charges for brother of gunman

The Associated Press

PARIS — A Frenchman suspected of helping his brother plot attacks against paratroopers and Jewish schoolchildren was handed preliminary murder and terrorism charges Sunday.

Abdelkader Merah denied any role in the attacks. Investigators suspect Merah of helping his brother Mohamed plan France's worst terrorist attacks in years, and they are investigating whether they were linked to an international network of extremists or worked on their own.

Abdelkader Merah's lawyer said her client feels like "a scapegoat."

"No one knew anything" about what Mohamed was plotting, lawyer Anne-Sophie Laguens said in Paris. She dismissed reports that Abdelkader had praised his brother's attacks. "He was never proud of those actions," she said.

Mohamed Merah, 23, claimed responsibility for killing three Jewish schoolchildren, a rabbi and three paratroopers this month.

After a 32-hour standoff with police, he died Thursday in a hail of gunfire in the southern city of Toulouse.

Since then, attention has focused on his older brother, Abdelkader, who was handed preliminary charges on Sunday of complicity to murder and theft and involvement in a terrorist enterprise, prosecutors said. Detained last week, he will remain in custody pending further investigation.

Preliminary charges under French law mean there is strong reason to believe a crime was committed but allow magistrates more time to investigate.

Authorities suspect Abdelkader Merah had a role in acquiring his younger brother's arsenal and financing his trips to Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Middle East.

Mohamed Merah claimed allegiance to al-Qaeda and told police he traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan for training.

Abdelkader was questioned several years ago about alleged links to a network sending Toulouse-area youths to Iraq, but no action was brought against him at the time.

Prosecutor François Molins said the inquiry is also looking at anyone else who could have been involved.

The brother's girlfriend, Yamina Mesbah, was held and then released early Sunday without being charged.

The Merah brothers' mother was released Friday night.