

Pope says he feels for Cubans in his heart

Catholic leader voices sympathy for prisoners

By Girish Gupta
Special for USA TODAY

HAVANA — Pope Benedict XVI expressed support for the “just aspirations and legitimate desires” of all Cubans, including prisoners, shortly after his arrival Monday to this communist-run island.

Benedict, having spent three days in Mexico, celebrated Mass in Santiago Monday evening before thousands of Cubans in a country where Fidel Castro proclaimed the triumph of his revolution in 1959, a dictatorship that has lasted 53 years.

The outdoor Mass was broadcast live on Cuban state television.

Benedict earlier said he carries the sufferings and joys of Cubans in his heart and mentioned inmates among others. Cubans have been jailed for criticizing the Castro regime and the lack of democratic freedoms.

“The pope will only make things better here. He'll bring peace, not war,” said Jorge Martínez, a street cleaner working in central Havana. “The government maintains everything. We're going in the right direction. We're very good.”

The interview with Martínez was interrupted by Cuban police wanting to know what questions were being asked. An officer who refused to give his name said, “Cuba doesn't need any change. We don't need any other system.”

In Mexico, crowds waving flags and Vatican-yellow balloons cheered Benedict at the airport, and mariachi bands played as he left.

“My brief but intense visit to Mexico is now coming to an end. Yet this is not the end of my affection and my closeness to a country so very dear to me,” he said.

Benedict urged Mexicans to draw on the Roman Catholic faith for strength against drug violence, poverty and other ills. He celebrated Sunday Mass before 350,000 worshippers. Members of the crowd said they were gratified by Benedict's recognition of their country's problems and said they felt reinvigorated in what they described as a daily struggle against criminality, corruption and economic hardship. “We pray for him to help us, that there be no more violence in the country,” said Lorena Diaz, 50, who owns a jeans factory in León. “We pray that he gives us peace.”

The pope delivered the message against the



In Santiago de Cuba: Pope Benedict XVI arrives at the altar to celebrate an outdoor Mass on Monday.

backdrop of the Christ the King monument, an important symbol of Mexican Christianity. The statue recalls a 1920s Catholic uprising against anti-clerical laws that forbade public worship services such as the one Benedict celebrated.

“I hope that people take his message of working for the good of all . . . and this violence ends,” said Miguel Ángel Rodríguez, a waiter.

The city of Santiago is Cuba's second-largest

and home to the Virgin of Charity of Cobre, a small wooden statue revered by Cubans, whether Catholic or not. The pope was spending the night in Santiago before heading to Havana, where he is to talk with Cuban President Raúl Castro and perhaps his brother Fidel.

Fidel Castro expelled priests and closed religious schools after his takeover. The government removed references to atheism in the constitution



Church has been critical of regime: The pope shakes hands with Cuban President Raúl Castro.

in the 1990s, and a 1998 visit by Pope John Paul II eased relations between Cuba and the church. Even so, the church has nearly no access to state-run radio or TV, is not allowed to open schools and has been barred from building churches.

The church has been a critic of the regime's repression. Cardinal Jaime Ortega, the archbishop of Havana, has negotiated with Raúl Castro for the release of political prisoners, and church magazines have published articles about the need for change.

On his flight to Mexico, Benedict said that in Cuba, it is “evident that Marxist ideology as it was conceived no longer responds to reality.” He urged Cubans to “find new models, with patience and in a constructive way.”

Some Cubans weren't impressed by Benedict's visit. “It's not important at all. The pope doesn't represent anyone,” Manuel Detra, 30, said as he sat on a step on a narrow street in Havana, cleaning a set of fan blades.

Contributing: The Associated Press; David Agren in León, Mexico

Afghan forces kill two Britons, one American

Afghan security forces shot and killed three international troops Monday, one of them an American, in two attacks. They were the latest attack in which Afghan forces have turned their weapons on their foreign partners.

U.S. Marine Gen. John Allen, the top commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, said these types of attacks are characteristic of any warfare involving insurgents.

“We experienced these in Iraq. We experienced them in Vietnam,” Allen said.

In one incident Monday, two British servicemen were killed by an Afghan soldier in front of the main gate of a base, the coalition said. Another NATO servicemember was shot and killed at a checkpoint by a man likely to be a member of a village fighting force. The Pentagon confirmed the dead soldier was American.



By Tsering Topgyal, AP

Tibetan sets self on fire

Protest in New Delhi: A Tibetan exile cries after a fellow Tibetan, Jamphel Yeshe, self-immolated during a protest Monday in New Delhi ahead of a visit by Chinese President Hu Jintao. Police took Yeshe to the hospital. His condition is critical.

Strauss-Kahn gets preliminary charges

Former International Monetary Fund chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn was handed preliminary charges Monday alleging he was involved in a hotel prostitution ring in France. His lawyer, Richard Malka, said Strauss-Kahn, 62, engaged in “libertine” acts but did nothing legally wrong. He's free on bail. Preliminary charges in France mean authorities have reason to believe a crime was committed but allow more time for investigation.

Egyptian liberals quit constitution panel

Two liberal Egyptian politicians on Monday pulled out of a 100-member panel to draft a new constitution after Islamists took a majority of its seats. The liberals complained that the body is not representative of the whole public.

The panel selected over the weekend by the parliament includes nearly 60 Islamists. The two who quit are independent lawmaker Amr Hamzawy and Christian activist Mona Makram Obeid.

The Associated Press

U.S. death toll

As of Monday, 1,792 U.S. servicemembers and three Defense Department civilians had been reported killed in the Afghanistan War.

The latest death identified:
► **Army Capt. Aaron D. Istre**, 37, of Vinton, La., died Saturday in Kabul; 13th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary).

Source: Defense Department

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