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Muslims Ask Pope Benedict to Apologize

Arab News —

JEDDAH, 16 September 2006 — Muslims demanded Pope Benedict XVI apologize and retract his statement linking Islam with violence as a wave of outrage swept the globe yesterday.

The Gulf Cooperation Council, which groups Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman, deplored the pope's statement and asked him to issue a clear and direct apology. In a statement, the GCC criticized the pope for intentionally ignoring the Islamic principles of tolerance as well as its humanitarian teachings that promote peace and oppose violence and hatred.

Saudi Islamic Affairs Minister Saleh Al-Asheikh also condemned the pope's statement, saying it reflected the pontiff's ignorance of Islam. He said such statements would promote hatred and enmity among peoples. "Islam has nothing to do with the evil and inhuman things the pope was referring to," the minister said. Al-Asheikh referred to the efforts made by Muslim organizations to promote dialogue between Islam and Christianity. He also called for more efforts to propagate the message of Islam.

Lebanon's most senior Shiite leader denounced the pope's remarks and demanded he personally apologize for insulting Islam. "We do not accept the apology through Vatican channels... and ask him (Benedict) to offer a personal apology — not through his officials — to Muslims for this false reading (of Islam)," Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah told worshippers in his Friday prayers sermon.

The 79-year-old pontiff launched a thinly veiled attack on Islam and the concept of holy war in a theological lecture to staff and students at the University of Regensburg in his native Bavaria in southern Germany on Tuesday. Quoting 14th-century Byzantine Christian Emperor Manuel Paleologos II who said the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had brought the world "evil and inhuman" things, the pope said, "He said, I quote, 'Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.'"

The pope was quoting from a book recounting a conversation between Paleologos II and an educated Persian on the truths of Christianity and Islam.

The Pakistani Parliament unanimously called on the pontiff to take back his words. "This House demands that the pope retract his remarks in the interest of harmony between religions," said the resolution passed by the National Assembly.

The comments also stirred anger in India with the head of the National Commission for Minorities saying the Pope sounded like a medieval crusader. "The language used by the pope sounds like that of his 12th century counterpart who ordered the crusades," said Hamid Ansari, chairman of the National Commission for Minorities.

In Gaza City, a grenade exploded outside a Christian church, although there were no casualties or damage and it was not immediately clear if this was linked to the pope's comment. Outgoing Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh said the head of the Roman Catholic Church should "stop attacking Islam."

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