

Church attacks in Israel 'poison' before pope's visit, cleric says



HAIFA Israel (Reuters) - The top Roman Catholic cleric in the Holy Land said on Sunday a spate of attacks against the Church had poisoned the atmosphere ahead of this month's visit by Pope Francis, and urged Israel to crack down on the perpetrators.

Fourteen attacks by suspected far-right Israelis have been reported in the past year. Several have been carried out over the last month, including a death threat daubed in Hebrew at the Assembly of Bishops at the Notre Dame Center in East Jerusalem.

The attacks have become known as "price tags" - a reference by ultranationalist Jews to making the Israeli government "pay" for any curbs on Jewish settlement on Palestinian land.

"There has been a marked increase of 'price tag' provocations within Israel," Fouad Twal, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, told reporters at a post-Easter procession in the city of Haifa, home to thousands of Israeli Arab church faithful.

"This wave of extremist actions of terror are surely of grave concern to all reasonable persons."

Twal said "the unrestrained acts of vandalism poison the atmosphere" ahead of Pope Francis' first pilgrimage to the Holy Land since ascending to the papacy. The pontiff will visit Jordan, the West Bank and Jerusalem from May 24 to 26.

Twal drew some encouragement from pledges by Israeli officials, notably Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon and Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, to crack down on "price tag" attackers.

But he added that until Israel's pledges to stop the vandalism "become acts, we remain sceptical."

"How can it be that they don't catch the perpetrators?" Twal said.

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Israeli officials say they have arrested dozens of suspected "price-taggers", though few have been

convicted in the courts. Police say there are only a few score culprits, many known by name, but about half are minors to whom judges show leniency.

Bishop Giacinto-Boulos Marcuzzo of Nazareth confirmed Israel had arrested a suspect for a threatening letter he received last month, which media reports said had been written in Hebrew.

Marcuzzo said the displays of intolerance were a "very dangerous" threat to Israeli-Arab coexistence.

"If we don't accept each other, we destroy this country," Marcuzzo said.

"Price tagging" has also occurred in Israeli military installations in the West Bank and Arab villages in Israel.

Twal said the attacks posed no particular safety threat to the pope's visit, and security arrangements were in hand.

"For sure these issues, vandalism, graffiti, is not a good sign," Twal told Reuters in an aside after his news conference, but pressed as to whether he feared for the pope's safety as a result, he replied: "No, no we are not afraid for the safety of the pope ... The people are very happy to receive him, I'm sure."

The pontiff, who like his predecessors John Paul and Benedict has friendly ties with Jewish religious leaders, is due to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the Notre Dame Center, located just outside the walls of the old city.

(Writing by Allyn Fisher-Ilan; Editing by Rosalind Russell)

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