



## Pope has joined US crusade, says Iran

- Response marks setback to 25 years of diplomacy
- Morocco denies killing of Italian is linked to row

**John Hooper in Rome**  
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Ayatollah Ali Khamenei yesterday accused the Pope of committing the world's biggest Christian church to what he claimed was a "crusade" launched by President Bush against Islam.

The Iranian leader's words represented a setback to more than 25 years of Vatican diplomacy aimed at distancing Roman Catholicism from the west many Muslims regard as hostile and decadent. In his first comment on remarks on Islam made by Pope Benedict last week, the Ayatollah said they formed "the latest link in the chain of a crusade against Islam started by America's Bush".

The Iranian leader's remarks increased concern for the safety of Roman Catholics in the Middle East. As even moderate Muslims deplored the Pope's comments, tensions remained high across the Islamic world.

In Morocco police sources denied that the death of an Italian EU official and his Belgian wife, found stabbed to death at their villa in Rabat, was religiously motivated. The sources were quoted as saying the two Europeans were killed during a burglary. Break-ins at the villas of foreigners in the Moroccan capital have increased recently, an Italian news agency report said. But this was the first time such a robbery had ended in death.

The Mujahedeen Shura Council, an umbrella organisation of Sunni Arab extremist groups that includes al-Qaida in Iraq, issued a statement on a web forum saying the pontiff and the west were "doomed". The message, the authenticity of which could not be immediately verified, said: "We shall continue our holy war and never stop until God enables us to chop your necks and raise the fluttering banner of monotheism when God's rule is established governing all people and nations."

The Vatican launched a damage limitation exercise. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, its secretary of state, sought to quell protests with a statement on Saturday. He told the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*: "We have instructed the nuncios [papal ambassadors] in Muslim countries to take my statement to the political and religious authorities and explain it to them."

He said they had also been encouraged to make available the full text of the lecture by the Pope that prompted the row. Addressing a university audience, he quoted a 14th-century Byzantine emperor who said Muhammad's contribution had been "evil and inhuman". Cardinal Bertone said the nuncios were under orders to point out "aspects that have so far been ignored, for example where the Holy Father describes the emperor's reference to Muhammad "as shockingly brusque". All the signs, however, were that they would run into a wall of scepticism.

The King of Morocco, Mohammed VI - scarcely an ally of fundamentalism - was reported to have chided the Pope in a letter he sent on Saturday. It invited the pontiff to respect "Islam in the same way as he respects other religions".

A representative of Jordan's signally moderate government said the Pope's expression of regret on Sunday was "a step forward", but "not sufficient". And in Egypt the veteran author Gamal al-Banna, who has received death threats for airing progressive views, said Benedict had "carried out a pre-meditated act. He detests Islam and has not made any apology." Almost the only glimmer of light came from Somalia, where an Islamist group accused of links to al-Qaida vowed to punish those responsible for the murder on Sunday of an Italian nun.

Vatican-watchers expressed pessimism about the consequences of the affair. Marco Politi, of the daily *La Repubblica*, said the policy towards the Islamic world would need to be "rebuilt from scratch".

Benedict's predecessor, John Paul II, responded to the 1979 Iranian revolution and the rise of fundamentalism by trying to keep open channels to the Islamic world. His opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq also helped to convince many Muslims that the west's biggest church was not to be confused with the policies of its most powerful nation.

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