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## Vatican, Muslims Set Talks for November

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By Philip Pullella

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VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - The Vatican and Muslim leaders agreed on Wednesday to establish a permanent official dialogue to improve often difficult relations and heal wounds still open from a controversial papal speech in 2006.

A joint statement said the first meeting of "The Catholic-Muslim Forum" will take place on November 4-6 in Rome with 24 religious leaders and scholars from each side.

Pope Benedict will address the group, the statement said.

The announcement came after a two-day meeting at the Vatican with five representatives of Muslims who had signed an unprecedented appeal to the Pope to begin a dialogue.

"We emerged with a permanent structure that will ensure that the Catholic-Muslim engagement and dialogue continues into the future," said Professor Aref Ali Nayed, director of the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center in Amman, Jordan.

He told a news conference the forum would be able "to work out issues and an exchange of opinions about important matters."

Catholic-Muslim relations nosedived in 2006 after Benedict delivered a lecture in Regensburg, [Germany](#), that was taken by Muslims to imply that Islam was violent and irrational.

Muslims around the world protested and the pope sought to make amends when he visited Turkey's Blue Mosque and prayed towards Mecca with its Imam.

"For some Muslims the wounds of the (pope's) German lecture are not completely healed and there are some Muslims who are boycotting the Vatican ... and still feel offended by that quite deeply," Nayed said in answer to a question.

### PAPAL SPEECH STILL HURTS

"Just because we are part of this initiative does not mean that we are not hurt by this, however we must not only dwell on the negative but also dwell on the positive. There have been some recent positive moves by the Vatican," he said.

After the fallout from the Regensburg speech, 138 Muslim scholars and leaders wrote to the German-born pontiff and other Christian leaders last year, saying "the very survival of the world itself" may depend on dialogue between the two faiths.

"Muslims and Christians make up about 55 percent of the world and there will be no peace in the world unless there is peace between these two communities," Ibrahim Kalin of the Seta Foundation in Turkey told the news conference.

The signatories of the Muslim appeal for dialogue, called the "Common Word," has grown to nearly 240 since.

"This whole initiative is about healing, it is about healing the wounds of a very pained and in many ways destroyed world. We have cruelty all over the place, we have wars, we have famines we have massacres, we have terrorist acts, we have torture, we have people who are kidnapped," Nayed said.

Although Benedict repeatedly expressed regret for the reaction to his speech in Regensburg, he stopped short of a clear apology sought by Muslims.

The Muslim delegation said the forum would meet every two years and alternate between Rome and a Muslim country but would establish structures for regular contacts and links to deal with one member called "an emergency situation."

(Editing by Sami Aboudi)

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