

Synod members appeal for peace in Rwanda

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VATICAN CITY, April 14 (Reuter) - Bishops at a Vatican synod on Africa appealed on Thursday to all sides in Rwanda to lay down their weapons and begin peace negotiations.

Pope John Paul also made peace in the country the special intention of his daily mass in his private chapel.

A first group of 40 Italians who fled the bloodbath in Rwanda returned to Italy on Thursday. The group, which consisted mainly of Roman Catholic nuns and construction workers, was evacuated from the Rwandan capital Kigali under the protection of French and Belgian troops.

The synod delegates said in an open appeal : "We make a heartfelt plea to all concerned in the conflict to lay down their arms and stop the atrocities and the killing."

"We ask our brothers and sisters in Rwanda to come together and resolve their differences by discussion," they said.

The small central African state has been torn apart by carnage that has killed thousands.

"We plead with individuals and organisations in Africa and outside Africa to use their influence to bring about forgiveness, reconciliation and peace in all Rwanda," the synod members said.

The synod's more than 300 delegates are discussing the future of the Roman Catholic Church in Africa. Rwandan bishops have not been able to attend the month-long gathering, which began last Sunday, because of the fighting.

In a message sent to the synod, the head of Rwandan bishops deplored the violence and called on both sides to begin negotiations to protect the common good of the country.

The 40 Italians flew to Rome's Fiumicino airport on a scheduled Alitalia flight from Nairobi after being airlifted to the Kenyan capital by military plane.

A further 60 compatriots being flown home by the Italian air force and were to arrive later on Thursday.

"Italians were not directly involved in any dangerous situations," said Rinaldo Menichelli, who worked for a Rome construction firm in Rwanda.

"We owe everything to the French and Belgian troops, whose protection allowed us to go unharmed to the airport, where the military aircraft was waiting take us home," he added.

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