

# Furious nations demand personal apology

The Sun - 18/9/2006

## BACKLASH CONTINUES OVER POPE'S PORTRAYAL OF ISLAM AS A RELIGION TAINTED WITH VIOLENCE

**VATICAN CITY:** Pressure mounted yesterday for Pope Benedict (*pix*) to issue a personal apology after Muslim fury erupted over comments he made about Islam.

The Vatican said on Saturday the Pope was sorry Muslims had been offended and that his comments had been misconstrued, but Muslim countries and religious groups remained angry at what they said portrayed Islam as a religion tainted with violence.

Morocco withdrew its ambassador to the Vatican, calling the Pope's remarks "offensive", while Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood - the main opposition force in the country's parliament - said the statement issued by the Vatican was not enough.

"We feel he has committed a grave error against us and that this mistake will only be removed through a personal apology," said the Brotherhood's deputy leader Mohammed Habib.

Muslim anger was sparked when the Pope made a speech in Germany last Tuesday referring to criticism of Prophet Mohammad by 14th century Byzantine Emperor Manuel

II Palaeologus. Using the terms "jihad" and "holy war", the Pope said violence was "incompatible with the nature of God".

But the Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, said in a statement the Pope "had absolutely no intention" of presenting Emperor Manuel's opinions on Islam as his own.

"The Holy Father thus sincerely regrets that certain passages of his address could have sounded offensive to the sensitivities of the Muslim faithful," Bertone said in a statement, only a day after taking over as "deputy pope".

He said the 79-year-old Pope confirmed "his respect and esteem for those who profess Islam" and hoped his words would be understood in their "correct meaning".

The backlash over the Pope's comments has cast doubt on his planned visit to Turkey in November. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, a Muslim, said before the Vatican statement, the Pope's comments were "ugly and unfortunate" and should be withdrawn.

Yemen's president publicly denounced the pontiff and five churches - only one of them Catholic - were attacked in the West Bank, although no one was hurt.

Egypt's Foreign Ministry summoned the Vatican's envoy to Cairo to express "extreme regret" at Benedict's speech.

But Chancellor Angela Merkel and other German politicians defended his comments, saying he had been misunderstood.

"It was an invitation to dialogue between religions," Merkel told the mass-circulation *Bild* newspaper in an interview.

Angry Muslim leaders flung what they saw as allegations of violence back at the West.

"How can he imply that Muslims are the creators of terrorism in the world while it is the followers of Christianity who have been aggressive against every country of the Islamic world?" prominent Saudi cleric Salman al-Odeh said. - Reuters

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