

Muslim seminary ends talks with Vatican over pope's comments

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January 20, 2011

VATICAN CITY (RNS) The most prestigious religious university in the Sunni Muslim world has suspended dialogue with the Vatican to protest statements by Pope Benedict XVI denouncing violence against Christians in Egypt.

The move, on Thursday (Jan. 20), came only nine days after Egypt recalled its ambassador to the Vatican for the same reason.

Sheikh Ahmed El-Tayeb, the grand imam of Cairo's Al-Azhar University, and members of the university's Islamic Research Center made the decision at an "emergency meeting" on Thursday, according to a statement released by the center.

"Pope Benedict's repeated criticism of Islam and his unjustified claim that Copts are persecuted in Egypt and the Middle East were behind the suspension decision," said the statement, as translated on the Website of the Dubai-based Gulf News.

On Jan. 2, Benedict denounced the "vile and murderous" New Year's Day killing of at least 21 people by a car bomb outside a Christian Coptic church in Alexandria, Egypt.

Al-Azhar's El-Tayeb had immediately criticized the pope's statement as "unacceptable interference in Egypt's affairs."

"I disagree with the pope's view," El-Tayeb said at the time, "and I ask why did the pope not call for the protection of Muslims when they were subjected to killings in Iraq?"

Benedict mentioned the attack again, along with other killings of Christians in the Middle East, during an address to foreign ambassadors at the Vatican on Jan. 10, when he called on "governments of the region to adopt ... effective measures for the protection of religious minorities."

The day after Benedict's speech to the diplomats, the government of Egypt recalled its ambassador to the Vatican to protest what a spokesman called the pope's "unacceptable interference in (Egypt's) internal affairs."