

Pope urges peace in 3-day trip to Lebanon

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BEIRUT (RNS) Pope Benedict XVI on Sunday (Sept. 16) took the unusual step of directly appealing to Arab countries to find "workable solutions" to the conflict in Syria and tensions throughout the Middle East.

The appeal came at the end of an open-air Mass on Beirut's waterfront as the pope wrapped up a three-day visit to Lebanon.

"I appeal to the Arab countries that, as brothers, they might propose workable solutions respecting the dignity, the rights and the religion of every human person," Benedict said in front of a crowd of around 350,000 people, according to the organizers' estimate.

Benedict's visit to Lebanon went smoothly despite security concerns from the civil war in neighboring Syria and anti-Western protests in much of the Middle East over an anti-Islam film. Violent riots erupted in the northern Lebanese town of Tripoli on Friday, Benedict's first day in the country, leaving one dead and 25 injured.

Nevertheless, Benedict received a warm welcome not just from the country's Christian minority, the largest in the Middle East, but also from Muslim political and religious leaders.

Around 20,000 Christian and Muslim youths, including some refugees from Syria,

joyously filled the esplanade of the Maronite patriarchate in the city of Bkerke on Saturday for a meeting with Benedict.

"There is a sort of Islamic enthusiasm" for the pope, said Mohammad Sammak, secretary general of Lebanon's Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue. He stressed that many Muslims are as worried as Christians by the rise of religious extremists in the region: "We are in the same boat."

During the visit, the 85-year old pontiff, who at times looked fatigued by the trip's intense schedule, cited peace, dialogue and religious freedom as the tools to solve the region's many conflicts and tensions.

"May God grant to your country, to Syria and to the Middle East, the gift of peaceful hearts, the silencing of weapons and the cessation of all violence," he told Lebanese faithful during the open air Mass.