

Pope defends migrants during trip to immigration-adverse Bulgaria

SOFIA, Bulgaria (Reuters) – Pope Francis said on Monday the plight of suffering immigrants and refugees was “the cross of humanity,” taking up their case for the second day of a visit to Bulgaria that has put him at odds with the government.

Bulgaria’s centre-right coalition government, which includes three nationalist anti-migrant parties, wants the European Union to close external borders and set up refugee centres outside the bloc.

It has built a fence along its border with Turkey and stepped up controls on its border with Greece to help block any repeat of the massive migrant influx that gripped Europe in 2015 and stoked support for far-right anti-immigrant parties.

Francis began his second day in Bulgaria with a visit to a refugee centre in Sofia, where he met with about 50 people and their children who are helped by a Catholic charity.

“Today, the world of migrants and refugees is a bit like a cross, the cross of humanity, a cross that many people suffer,” he told them in improvised remarks after hearing some of their stories and listening to children singing.

The centre, housed in a former school building, helps migrants mostly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Taha Saber Ismael, a refugee from Iraq, gave the pope a printed note in imperfect English asking him to help his and six other Iraqi families obtain residency permits because they were “hoping having good and safe country to live in”.

An organiser at the refugee centre told the pope that people of all faiths, including many Muslims, had volunteered to help the migrants, in a sign of inter-religious dialogue.

ORTHODOX CHURCH SHUNS PRAYER MEETING

But the difficulty of that dialogue at institutional level was illustrated at an evening prayer service – led by the pope with Jewish, Muslims and Protestant

leaders - which the Bulgarian Orthodox Church declined to attend.

Orthodox leaders have taken a hardline stance against prayer with Catholics and rebuffed the Vatican's push for unity between the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity that split in 1054.

Less than one percent of Bulgarians are Roman Catholic and Francis ministered to them earlier on Monday when he flew to Rakovski, a predominantly Roman Catholic town in southern Bulgaria. There, he gave 245 children from all over Bulgaria their first communion.

Shortly after arrival in Bulgaria on Sunday, Francis, who has made the defence of migrants a key plank of his pontificate, urged government leaders to "not close your eyes, your hearts or your hands, in accordance with your best tradition, to those who knock at your door".

Bulgaria, the EU's poorest country, has taken an anti-immigrant stance even though it has a rapidly ageing population and a low birth rate. More than two million Bulgarians have left the country since the fall of communism in 1989 in search of better opportunities in western Europe and beyond.

General dissatisfaction over slow growth, security threats posed by Islamist militants and a backlash against migration across open EU borders have boosted support for euro sceptic nationalists in many member states ahead of elections to the European Parliament later this month.

Francis heads to North Macedonia for the final leg of the trip on Tuesday.

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