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Pope's call to reject violence

YAOUNDE: Pope Benedict yesterday urged Christians and Muslims in Africa to shun inter-religious violence, but criticism of a comment he made about AIDS showed no sign of abating.

The pope began his third day in Cameroon by meeting with 22 leaders of the country's Muslim community before starting saying an open-air mass at a stadium here for a throbbing crowd of tens of thousands.

In his address to the Muslims at the Vatican's embassy here, the pope said both religions should "reject all forms of violence and totalitarianism".

"May the enthusiastic cooperation of Muslims, Catholics and other Christians in Cameroon be a beacon to oth-

er African nations of the enormous potential of an inter-religious commitment to peace, justice and the common good," he added.

Clashes between Muslim and Christian gangs sparked by a disputed election killed hundreds of people in the Nigerian city Jos last November.

In January, Sudanese authorities threw a United States-based aid group out of its Darfur region after officials found Arabic-language bibles in its office.

The pope has been using his meetings with Muslims to try to patch up relations which nose-dived in 2006 after he made a speech in Regensburg, Germany, that was taken by Muslims to imply that Islam was violent and irrational.



Pope Benedict XVI adjusting his zucchetto as he celebrates Vespers in Yaounde, Cameroon, on Wednesday. — AFP picture

That speech led to worldwide protests by Muslims.

In yesterday's address, he said "religion and reason mutually reinforce each other", another apparent attempt to show that he did not believe that Islam was irrational, as his 2006 speech had been interpreted.

But three days into his visit, the trip was still overshadowed by the worldwide controversy that was sparked when he said condoms "increase the problem" of AIDS.

The Vatican spokesman defended the pope's stand, saying Benedict was merely restating the position of his predecessors that fidelity within heterosexual marriage and abstinence were the best ways to stop AIDS. — Reuters