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Pope heads to voodoo heartland for second Africa visit

COTONOU: Pope Benedict XVI arrives in Benin on Friday, marking his second visit to Africa in a nation considered the heartland of voodoo and after his 2009 trip to the continent led to an outcry over condoms.

He is expected to be welcomed by tens of thousands of Benin citizens as well as pilgrims from West Africa and beyond during the three-day visit that will culminate with a mass on Sunday in a stadium in the economic capital Cotonou.

Benedict is to arrive Friday afternoon for the trip that will also take the 84-year-old pontiff to Ouidah, a city heavy with symbolism as a centre of voodoo and which served as a major slave trading port.

A Benetton advertising campaign launched this week threatened to divert some of the attention away from issues related to the visit after controversy erupted over a photo montage showing the pope kissing a leading imam.

On Thursday, the Vatican said that it was taking legal action to prevent the publication of the photo montage that was part of the campaign.

Its statement came despite an announcement by the Italian clothing company that it was pulling the montage in the wake of severe criticism from the Holy See.

The highlight of the pope's trip to a region that has the world's fastest growing number of Catholics will be the formal signing on Saturday of an apostolic exhortation called "The Pledge for Africa".

The main message of the exhortation—"Africae Munus" in the Vatican's official language, Latin—will be peace, reconciliation and justice.

The document, a summary of the conclusions of the synod of African bishops in 2009, is also expected to refer to the problems of unequal development, corruption, rural poverty and the rise of an alternative Christian movement.

The pope is set to sign the proclamation on Saturday in West Africa's biggest cathedral in Ouidah, where missionaries arrived 150 years ago.

Benedict is likely to face questions over the Catholic Church's stance on condoms during his visit to the continent, the world's hardest hit by HIV and AIDS.

His first trip to Africa in 2009 to Cameroon and Angola caused a global outcry when he suggested condom distribution aggravated the AIDS problem.

The pope has since seemed to ease that stance, saying in a book published last year that condom use is acceptable "in certain cases," notably to reduce the risk of HIV infection.

Catholics in Africa have long been caught between the church's doctrine and the realities of a killer disease affecting millions of people. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to nearly 70 percent of the world's HIV cases.

The physically demanding three-day trip to the country of some nine million people comes amid concerns by observers that the pontiff's busy workload may be damaging his health.

Benedict will be following in the footsteps of his predecessor John Paul II, who visited Benin twice—in 1982 and 1993. The globe-trotting John Paul visited 41 countries in Africa.—AFP