

**Bomb strikes Caracas cathedral;
Churches respond with worry, prayer**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg
LAM News Service

Miami, FL (LAMNS)--Venezuelan police say that they have no leads in the bombing of the main cathedral in Caracas that injured two people and damaged a confessional.

The bomb, one in a series of explosions and threats, sent a chill through the South American country's dominate Roman Catholic church in that it struck at its most sacred spot and its seat of power and influence.

In response to the bombing, Roman Catholic authorities closed seven other major churches in the capital city for security reasons and then reopened them, according to church law, with a re-consecration service.

Some local authorities speculated that the explosion, and threats to other churches, may be in response to official church criticism of President Hugo Chavez and his leftist government. Chavez campaigned on a platform of support for the poor and the overturning of what he called an elitist and corrupt political system.

Government officials claimed that the bomb threats were part of a growing conspiracy to destabilize the government.

Police have discovered dozens of explosive devices in subway stations, schools, restaurants and street corners in recent months. Police deactivated a bomb in the Caracas home of former president Carlos Andres Perez.

The incidents are adding a new sense of insecurity in a city already grappling with a crime rate that claims dozens or even hundreds of lives each week.

Church officials and members expressed shock that the unknown assailants would strike at the most sacred heart of the nation's church. Monsignor William Delgado, from Merida state, commented that "we are living in a climate of anguish, anxiety, tension and nervousness and the explosion gave us a fright." He said that even though the blast was small, it created anxiety "because when the people go to a church they are looking for certain calm and peace for reflection."

Fr. Pedro Freites, a sub secretary for the Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference, said that the placement of the pipe bomb in the churches of the capital are acts of terrorism that the church resoundly condemns. He said that the Episcopal Conference rejects this form of protest not only against the church, but also against any institution and human life. "The social peace of the country is in risk," he warned.

Church members were shocked to find churches closed for the first time in memory. "It is the end of the world," said Pedro Rivera, an unemployed worker who came to one of the churches to pray.

Conflict between the church and state has increased in recent months as Catholic officials have spoken out against the leftist leanings of Chavez and his attempts to grasp more control over the government. Many fear that his close friendship with Cuban President Fidel Castro and his anti-

business rhetoric will draw the country further into a socialist or communist form of government and diminish foreign investment. Already thousands of upper and middle class business people have left the country or sent their funds into bank accounts in Miami.

Meanwhile, the government has asked both Catholic and Protestant leaders to participate in forums that will work to solve Venezuela's growing social and economic problems. This request has caused widespread discussion among church leaders as they struggle with whether they want to be viewed as working with Chavez's erratic government, or even if they as Catholics and Protestants want to work together.

Evangelical Christians are working to respond to the country's increasing violence. "As Christian's our response to the increase in violence must come from a biblical perspective on justice," says missionary Greg Burch who works in Caracas with the Latin America Mission.

"Even our response to the most recent bombs being planted in the Catholic churches must be Christian in nature. This response must include trusting in our Lord and restoration for those involved in these acts of violence. Violence must be confronted with an aggressive love that seeks to prevent and to heal.

Greg, who works with street children, says, "This is where we feel that our ministry to street children comes into play. We are preventing children and youth from getting involved with drugs and crime in the first place by introducing them to their Heavenly Father, one life at a time."

The Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries as well as in Spain. LAM is seeking to place new missionaries throughout the region. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission's web site may be found at <http://www.lam.org>. LAM's Canadian office is at 3075 Ridgeway Drive, Unit 14, Mississauga, ON L5L 5M6.

Bomb strikes Caracas cathedral; Churches respond with worry, prayer, *LAM News Service*,
Aug 8, 2001