

Assassins Kill Dutch Priest for Refusing to Leave Embattled City

Frans van der Lugt, a Jesuit priest who refused to leave the embattled city of Homs, Syria, in solidarity with the few Christians still living there, was killed by assassins Monday in his garden.

Known among the people as Abouna Francis, the native Dutchman had worked in Syria for more than 40 years. He was 75.

“Father Frans was apparently killed by targeted headshots. We have received a phone report from a Christian who was with him in the Old City,” reported Aid to the Church in Need, a Catholic agency, in a Monday statement that cited another Jesuit in Syria, the Rev. Ziad Hillaal.

Independent news accounts reported that van der Lugt was forcibly removed from his house and pulled into his garden, where he was shot twice through the head.

The son of a banker, Van der Lugt arrived in the Middle East in 1966, first living in Lebanon and moving to Homs in the early 1970s. As is common in the Jesuit order, he was a teacher, with an emphasis in working with special-needs students.

As the Syrian civil war approached Homs, the priest resolved to stay with the dwindling Christian community that remained. Tens of thousands of Christians across the country, targeted by rebels who consider them allies of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, have fled their homes during the way, many to other locations in Syria, and others to neighboring Lebanon or Turkey.

Once home to an estimated 60,000 Christians, fewer than 30 remain in the Old City sector of Homs, an ancient town that was a rebel stronghold in the early days of the three-year-old Syrian uprising. The government has regained control of much of the city, while rebels retain a hold on the Old City.

During a February interview with Dutch radio, van der Lugt explained his reasons for staying in the besieged Old City sector.

"When I leave, nothing will be left of this building," he said. "And I don't want to leave alone the 28 Christians that have remained."

During the interview, the priest described the Old City as almost completely destroyed, and the people as constantly hungry. A recent food delivery by the U.N., he said, "isn't enough at all for the about 2,000 people left."

"They brought pans and cloths the people didn't need. We need rice, food, that didn't come in sufficiently. There is a huge lack of food. At our breakfast we eat olives and drink tea. In the afternoon we make soup with what grows between the stones on the street."

"In the evening," he said, "we just see what we can get."

Even in his advanced age, van der Lugt got around the war-pocked city on his bicycle, tending to the elderly and disabled and trying, like everyone else, to obtain enough food for the day. It was a constant struggle.

On Jan. 27, a short video was posted on You Tube in which van der Lugt, sitting before a darkened altar, speaks directly into the camera about the desperate situation in Homs. "One of our biggest problems is hunger," he said. "There is nothing to eat."

The Rev. Hillal, quoted by Aid to the Church in Need, called

van der Lugt “a ray of joy and hope to all those trapped in the Old City of Homs, waiting for yet another UN permission to evacuate.”

“God have mercy on us, who could not save him from sniper fire.”