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## SYRIA | Elderly Dutch Priest Murdered

Father Frans van der Lugt, an elderly Jesuit priest, was murdered in the city of Homs April 7. There are conflicting reports on the circumstances surrounding Father Frans van der Lugt's death.

A statement by the Jesuits in the Middle East and Maghreb to their colleagues in Rome said Father Frans van der Lugt had been "abducted by armed men who beat and then killed him with two bullets to the head, in front of the residence of the Jesuits in Homs." However, Jan Stuyt, Secretary of the Dutch Jesuits, told Agence France Presse that "a man came into his house, took him outside and shot him twice in the head."

Father van der Lugt had refused to leave Homs during a UN operation earlier this year which saw approximately 1,400 civilians evacuated from the city, opting instead to stay behind with those who could not be evacuated in time. At the time he informed a Dutch radio station, "I don't want to leave alone the 28 Christians that have remained."

Father van der Lugt arrived in Syria in the mid-60s after spending two years in Lebanon learning Arabic and was involved in various projects among the poor during his time in Syria. In the 1980s, he set up a farming project to help young people with learning difficulties.

During his time in Syria, Father van der Lugt developed very good relationships with both Christians and Muslims and was widely respected. Since his murder, tributes have poured in locally and from around the world, including from the UN Secretary General, the Dutch Foreign Minister and the Vatican. Lord Alton of Liverpool also paid tribute, "He personified all the best qualities and ideals which the Society of Jesus stands for. He joins a long list of Jesuit martyrs who have sacrificed their lives truly believing that a man has no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends."

Syria's religious and ethnic minorities have been targeted increasingly by Islamist jihadi groups. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) remains concerned by the disappearance of Archbishop Boulos (Paul) Yazigi of the Greek Orthodox Church and Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church, who were abducted by gunmen on April 22, 2013, as they returned from a humanitarian mission near the Syria/Turkey border. Their whereabouts are still unknown. In July 2013, Italian Jesuit priest Father Paolo Dall'Oglio was kidnapped by Islamists in the city of Al-Raqqa, as he tried to negotiate the release of several hostages. He too remains missing. Syrian Christians have called for a day of prayer and fasting for Syria on April 11.

A recent study by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claims approximately 146,000 Syrians have been killed since the start of the civil war. Other reports confirm approximately 7 million have been displaced during the war, amounting to a third of the country's population.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW is saddened by the news of Father van der Lugt's murder and offer our prayers at this difficult time for all who knew and loved him. He was clearly a man of extraordinary courage and commitment, who devoted his life to the Syrian people to the very end, as was demonstrated by his refusal to leave Homs and his decision to stay in solidarity with those who could not be evacuated. These are deeply worrying times for the people of Syria, as violence and atrocities continue, civilian casualties mount, and the warring parties exhibit a reluctance to pursue peace. CSW urges every party to the conflict to adhere to humanitarian standards with regard to the treatment of civilians, religious leaders and religious establishments, regardless of creed or ethnicity. We also reiterate our request for the safe and unconditional release of the two Archbishops, almost a year after they were abducted, and for the safe return of Father Paolo Dall'Oglio."