

France and Germany rebuke Pope over condom and Aids in Africa comments

France and Germany led a blistering attack on Wednesday on the Pope's remarks about condoms and Aids, as the Vatican scrambled to prevent the row derailing his African tour.

By Nick Squires in Rome

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The French and German governments were joined by the European Union in taking the unusual step of issuing a direct public rebuke to Pope Benedict XVI, saying his claims that condom use could make the Aids problem worse risked undermining decades of public health policy.

"France voices extremely strong concern over the consequences of Benedict XVI's comments," said a French foreign ministry spokesman. "While it is not up to us to pass judgment on Church doctrine, we consider that such comments are a threat to public health policies and the duty to protect human life."

The French spokesman was responding to comments that the Pope made on Tuesday that condoms should not be used to battle the spread of Aids, and that they could instead "aggravate" the epidemic because they encouraged promiscuity.

He made the comments en route to Cameroon, the first stop on a week-long African tour that takes him to Angola tomorrow. Alain Juppe, the former French prime minister, added: "This Pope is starting to be a real problem."

A spokesman for the French medical charity Médecins du Monde launched a scathing attack, saying: "Millions of people are going to be contaminated because of these remarks. We are very angry because this undermines years of work."

In the Pope's homeland, the health minister and the development minister said in a joint statement that "condoms save lives, as much in Europe as in other countries".

Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a German Green MEP, described the Pontiff's remarks as "close to premeditated murder".

There were also signs of dissent within the Roman Catholic Church. "Anyone who has Aids and is sexually active, anyone who seeks multiple partners, must protect others and themselves," said Hans-Jochen Jaschke, the auxiliary bishop of Hamburg.

In Britain there was an equally angry reaction. "This represents a major step backwards in terms of global health education, is entirely counter-productive, and is likely to lead to increases in HIV infection in Africa and elsewhere," said Prof Quentin Sattentau, Professor of Immunology at Oxford University.

Since Aids was first identified in the early 1980s, an estimated 25 million people have died and 33 million are now infected with HIV, two thirds of them in Africa.

Vatican officials defended the Pope. While the Holy See appeared to soften the original statement in an online transcript of the interview, altering the Pontiff's original remark to say that using condoms merely "risked" aggravating the problems, the Vatican stood by the statement that condom distribution was not the best way to combat Aids.

Federico Lombardi, the Pope's official spokesman, maintained that he was simply upholding the position of the Church, which insists that the spread of Aids can be prevented by abstinence or fidelity to one partner.

"Benedict XVI reiterated the stance already confirmed by John Paul II," said Fr Lombardi, speaking in Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon.

"Don't expect any change of position during this trip. It's not through the power of condoms that one blocks the spread of Aids."

