

Dutch priest murdered in his church in the besieged Syrian city of Homs

Father Francis Van der Lugt had insisted on remaining in Homs during more than three years of war as he worked to keep international attention on the plight of starving residents



Father Francis Van der Lugt Photo: Yazan Homsy/ Reuters

A Dutch priest who had refused to leave the besieged Syrian city of Homs in solidarity with its residents, was on Monday beaten and then shot dead in his monastery by a masked gunman.

During more than three years of war, Father Francis Van der Lugt, 75, had insisted on remaining in the destroyed Old City of Homs, risking starvation and near constant shellfire, until every last civilian could be evacuated from the district.

The Jesuit priest - of the same order as the Pope - had helped to keep the plight of the Old City's residents in the international spotlight by writing letters to his church order in Holland, and posting video messages from inside his monastery in the besieged Bustan al-Diwan district.

It was in this monastery, that, after more than four decades of living in Syria, Father Van der Lugt was murdered.

The gunman entered the monastery at around 9am on Monday morning, said Abo Moaz, an opposition

activist who spoke to the Telegraph as he stood "next to the body of Father Francis" at the scene of the crime.

Abo Moaz recounted speaking to an eye-witness of the murder: "The Christian man told me he had been alone with Father Francis and a Christian woman in the monastery when the gunman entered. The woman ran out to ask for help," he said. "The masked man took Father to the garden of the monastery and made him sit on a chair. After that he shot him in the head. The bullet hit near his right eye, penetrating his skull."

Reverend Ziad Hillal, another Jesuit who had previously lived with the Dutch priest in the Homs monastery, echoed Mr Moaz's account: "Father Francis was killed in the garden of our monastery. It was a premeditated act," he told Vatican Radio.

It is so far unknown who committed the murder.

The Syrian state television news agency SANA blamed the killing on "terrorists" but gave no further details. Some members of the opposition blamed the death on "pro-regime gunmen" who they said had "infiltrated" opposition ranks.



In recent months Father Van der Lugt was known as a champion for inter-religious dialogue, who had managed to maintain working, generally good, relationships with some of the most hardline Islamic rebel groups in the area.

Abo Moaz said: "Everybody loved and respected him, the revolutionaries, the Muslim religious leaders and the ordinary people."

In September of last year, in a letter that was widely published, the priest wrote: "There is an atmosphere of love, openness and interaction and those of us who remain feel that we are one group. It's hard to live a painful circumstances alone, and it is possible that these conditions become harder and harder."

In an interview with the Telegraph earlier this year, Father Van der Lugt, who had lived in Syria since 1966, said: "I have learned about the generosity of the Syrian people. If these people are suffering now I want to be in solidarity with them. As I was with these people in their good times, I am with them in

their pain."

He told of how his neighbours were turning mad with hunger, living in a district where the shops had been stripped bare after more than one year of complete siege. He described how they were forced to run the gauntlet of daily shelling attacks and airstrikes, as they went in search of meals - usually a mixture of olives and weeds.

In February, the majority of the residents that remained in Old Homs were allowed to leave, and a limited amount of food and medical supplies were allowed in, under a tentative ceasefire that was negotiated by the United Nations, but in which Father Van der Lugt also reportedly played a part.

After the ceasefire, only approximately 1000 residents remained in the Old City, of which only 24 were Christians, but still Father Van der Lugt decided to stay.

A member of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the body that has delivered aid parcels to Homs, said his death may have been related to another imminent evacuation attempt of civilians, that Father Van der Lugt had been helping to negotiate.



"There was a plan to take more residents out of Old Homs at the weekend," said the source, who asked not to be named. "There are many armed groups inside the Old City who have stopped the evacuations in the past. They don't want all the civilians to leave, as they fear the Syrian army would then flatten the area."

Albert Abdul-Massih, who worked along Van Der Lugt, told the Associated Press that the slain priest has "called two days ago and told me that he is hopeful that the siege will end soon".

Abo Moaz, voiced the same suspicions about the motive for the priest's death, but blamed pro-government militiamen: "The regime is responsible about the killing of Father Francis, because today was the day a truce was going to be signed and there is some people who don't want that," he said.

On Monday afternoon, residents in the Old City, including Muslim rebel commanders, worked to prepare his body for burial.

Video footage posted on YouTube showed man carefully wrapping the priest's gaping head wound in

white cloth, washing his body and clothing him in his Sunday sermon dress.

"Now we are engaging in negotiations with the regime to get his body out," said Abo Moaz. "Whilst we were shrouding the body, two mortars were shot by the regime at the monastery."

Reverend Federico Lombardi, a Vatican spokesperson, on Monday paid tribute to Father Van der Lugt as a man "who showed great courage in remaining loyal to the Syrian people despite an extremely risky and difficult situation".

Residents in Homs on Monday urged the international community not to forget them, even after Father Van der Lugt's death.

After the last evacuation in February, "the global interest died out but our tragedy did not," said members of a local negotiation committee from Old Homs in a signed statement. "Today, the humanitarian situation inside the besieged areas of Homs is extremely critical. Some civilians are not far from death by starvation, and normal medical cases are ending with the death because of the lack of medical supplies."

"Our continuing appeals to those in a position to help us were all in vein, while our tragedy has kept accelerating dramatically."

Ruth Sherlock, Beirut and Magdy Samaan - BBC