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Bishop calls for swift, diplomatic end in Afghanistan

Simon Caldwell Catholic News Service | Nov. 9, 2009

LONDON -- The bishop who heads the Military Diocese of Great Britain has urged the British government to adequately equip the armed forces serving in Afghanistan and to use diplomacy to bring a swift end to the 8-year-old conflict.

Bishop Richard Moth said in a homily during a Nov. 8 Remembrance Sunday Mass in Westminster Cathedral in London that each day "more names are added to the list of those who have lost their lives."

"While there is no such thing as war without risk, those currently serving deserve all the necessary support and resources they need to fulfill the task they have been given in such a way that this risk is reduced as much as possible," the bishop said on the day that Britain honors its war dead.

"Diplomatic solutions must continue to be sought, alongside the armed operation, so that a resolution can be brought about as speedily as possible," he said.

"The death of a loved one is never easy to bear, but when life is lost at a young age, far from home and family, it is all the more difficult to accept," he added. "Even though the cause for which the service man or woman died may be a just one, the suffering of family and friends is indeed great."

The British government has been criticized by some senior army officers for failing to equip troops assigned to Afghanistan with sufficient numbers of helicopters and armored vehicles. Several officers have resigned in protest, saying the equipment shortages and bureaucratic shortcomings have led to unnecessary deaths.

Troop deaths -- 232 since 2001 and 95 in 2009 alone -- have led to declining public support for British involvement in the conflict.

A ComRes survey carried out for the British Broadcasting Corp. Nov. 8 showed that 64 percent of voters now felt the war was "unwinnable" while 63 percent called for troops to be withdrawn immediately.

Catholic politicians, who were generally opposed to the Iraq War, are divided about the morality of the war in Afghanistan.

Jim Dobbin, a Labor Party member of Parliament, told Catholic News Service Nov. 5 that early withdrawal could destabilize neighboring Pakistan, which is engaged in its own conflict with the Taliban and its allies.

"It (withdrawal) would be an opportunity for al-Qaida and the Taliban to have better control and cause even more chaos in Pakistan because the government there is very fragile," he said. "I think it would be fatal if we walked away."

But Joe Benton, another Labor Party member of Parliament, questioned the continued presence of British forces in the country.

"It is questionable if this war is winnable," he told CNS Nov. 5. "I have very serious doubts about the morality of the war. On balance, if I was given the choice, I would look toward withdrawal. ... I am coming to the conclusion that we won't resolve it through this action."

David Amess, a Conservative Party member of Parliament, also a Catholic, said he had been concerned about the war from the outset. "I feel that the government has not proven the case for us being there," he said in a Nov. 5 telephone interview.

But Nigel Biggar, an Oxford University theologian and expert on the just war theory, which outlines the principles under which a war can be waged, argued that British involvement in Afghanistan could be morally justified.

"There is a connection between keeping the Taliban out of Afghanistan and keeping the streets of Britain safe," Biggar, an Anglican, told CNS.

"There is a very strong reason why we are there but I feel the government representation of the case to be feeble," he said. "If it is important that we are there, then Washington and London need to get a grip and do what it takes."

He said the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan "seems to me justified," adding that he believes "we do have reason to stay there."

At the same time he did not think the war to be a lost cause, but that the countries leading the military effort "need to do some hard thinking about what success looks like."

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