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Religious leaders urge Senators to ratify START treaty.

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WASHINGTON
Catholic and other religious leaders have urged the U.S. Senate to ratify the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty by the end of the year, saying the pact is important for the future of the world and critical to making it safer.

On Nov. 16, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the treaty in a 14-4 vote and urged prompt consideration of the treaty by the full Senate.

The Catholic Church worldwide "has long been concerned about the threat of nuclear weapons and our support for their elimination is based on our deep commitment to preserving human life and dignity," the Massachusetts bishops said in a Nov. 15 letter to Democratic Sen. John F. Kerry and Republican Sen. Scott Brown, both of Massachusetts.

Kerry is chairman of the foreign relations committee.

Signed April 8 in Prague by U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, the START "follow-on" treaty calls for both countries to reduce their strategic arsenals -- weapons deployed on long-range missiles, bombers and submarines -- to 1,550 each. Under the previous START pact, which expired in December, both countries reduced their strategic arsenals to 2,200 weapons each.

The Vatican and the U.S. bishops "continue to promote the twin and interrelated goals of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation," the Massachusetts bishops wrote.

"As teachers and pastors, we offer our moral direction and encouragement with the hope that, with your backing, the treaty will be ratified by the Senate. We truly believe that this step us critical to making our world safer," they said.

The letter was signed by: Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley of Boston and Bishops George W. Coleman of Fall River, Timothy A. McDonnell of Springfield and Robert J. McManus of Worcester.

On Nov. 18, the staff leaders of the National Council of Churches and Church World Service sent messages to senators urging they ratify the treaty. They sent the lawmakers a copy of a call for ratification unanimously adopted about a week before by delegates to the general assembly of the two church bodies meeting in New Orleans.

"This treaty is a vital step in moving the United States into greater partnership with the world as it turns away from nuclear weapons," said the letter from the Rev. Michael Kinnamon, general secretary of the NCC, and the Rev. John L. McCullough, executive director of Church World Service.

"The United States as a whole has a chance to contribute to this global movement by shrinking the largest

nuclear arsenal in the world," the two said, quoting the resolution passed by the general assembly.

Their letter said the treaty "cannot be caught in the gridlock of Capitol Hill" because its ratification "is too important for the future and security of the United States and the world. On behalf of Christians across this country, we strongly urge you to bring the treaty to a vote, and to support ratification of START.

The Russian Duma also must approve the treaty, and from that point, both countries will have seven years to reach the agreement's targets.

Reuters reported Nov. 16 that Medvedev "has made it clear the Kremlin-controlled Duma should not ratify the treaty until Senate approval is certain." Sen. Jon Kyl of Arizona, the Republican whip and leader of negotiations with the Obama administration over the treaty, has said there is not enough time to resolve differences in the Senate's lame duck session, which began Nov. 15.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has been among church organizations working to build support for the new arms treaty among Catholics in the pew as well as acrss the gap separating Senate Democrats and Republicans on the issue

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