NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

USCCB joins in petition asking US to change 'outdated' nuclear policy

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | May. 16, 2012

WASHINGTON -- The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops joined about four dozen other national organizations in amassing more than 50,000 signatures on a petition asking for a change in the United States' "outdated" nuclear arms policy.

"You must act now to reduce the nuclear danger and the role of nuclear weapons," said the petition, addressed to President Barack Obama.

The petition urges Obama to "end outdated U.S. nuclear war-fighting strategy, dramatically reduce the number of U.S. nuclear weapons and the number of submarines, missiles and bombers that carry those weapons, and take U.S. nuclear weapons off high alert. Maintaining large numbers of nuclear forces on alert increases the risk of accident or miscalculation."

A May 15 announcement from the groups involved said the petition was delivered to the White House May 7. Stephen Colecchi, director of the bishops' Office of International Justice and Peace, represented the USCCB.

"This is just one of the many expressions of support for overdue changes in the United States' nuclear weapons strategy which is still burdened by Cold War thinking," said Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, which spearheaded the petition drive and assembled the coalition of organizations that signaled their support.

The United States, Kimball told Catholic News Service in a May 15 telephone interview, possesses about 1,700 strategically positioned nuclear warheads. Russia has about 1,500. Each has more strategically deployed warheads than the rest of the "nuclear club" -- China, France, Great Britain, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea -- has warheads of all kinds combined.

"Just one U.S. nuclear-armed submarine can destroy several cities," Kimball said. "We today possess 12 submarines with nuclear weapons."

Kimball said, "If our goal is to deter, one of these weapons is far larger than the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki," the two Japanese cities targeted by atomic weapons in World War II. He described the stockpile as "massive nuclear overkill that's ... dangerous and costly and unnecessary."

He called for "a sense of proportionality" as Obama is due to receive soon a comprehensive study on the nation's nuclear forces. "These decisions coming from President Obama very soon are once-in-a-decade decisions. This is President Obama's best opportunity to change outdated thinking."

In a March 2 letter to National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon, Bishop Richard E. Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, chairman of the USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace, outlined some moral considerations to take into account during the study.

"The horribly destructive capacity of nuclear arms makes them disproportionate and indiscriminate weapons that profoundly endanger human life," Bishop Pates said. "At a time of fiscal restraints, tens of billions of dollars currently allocated to maintaining Cold War-based nuclear force structures could be redirected to other critical needs, especially to programs that serve poor and vulnerable people at home and abroad."

For decades, the Vatican and the U.S. bishops have promoted "the twin and interrelated policy goals of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation," Bishop Pates said. "This is an ideal that will take years to reach, but it is a task which our nation must take up with renewed energy.

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