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Oh, please: this is not ëdefense'

Joan Chittister | Jul. 14, 2006 From Where I Stand

As a citizen of this country, I am concerned about the way the government has treated the Constitution and the Congress.

As a Christian, I am equally concerned about the way this country has conducted the war against Iraq, now euphemistically called "The Global War Against Terror."

As human beings, however, there are concerns beyond both the national and ecclesiastical that deserve attention, as well.

Some of them, we find difficult even to understand.

In Darfur, Sudan, for instance, pastoralists and small farmers, insurgents and Janjaweed militia -- a private army of sorts who are government supported but not government army recruits -- are locked in battle over water and resources. The conflict has had little international attention.

The reason is relatively clear. We have little contact with the people there. And never having really understood the situation in the first place, eventually, we forget them entirely. "Their problem; not ours," we say. "Not of our making."

But Israel and Palestine are another thing entirely.

After WWII and its all-out, demonic attempt to exterminate Jewish people for the simple reason that they were Jewish, the Allied Powers carved out a portion of what was then Palestine as Jewish territory.

The struggle from then until now between Palestinians and Israelis has been brutal and bitter. Palestinians refused to share what had for centuries been their homeland. Israelis who, having managed to survive the Nazi holocaust of the Jewish people, vowed never to be at the mercy of governments other than their own again.

And unlike Darfur, the Israeli-Palestinian affair has tentacles that reach out to most of the rest of the world who, by virtue of their Jewish or Christian or Muslim roots, all call this land "Holy."

Whatever happens in Israel and Palestine, in other words, happens to us all, to most of the globe. By religious tradition. By ethnic heritage. By proxy.

We are very aware of the stakes here in ways we are not in Darfur. We are not numb to the possibility that war here could mean war everywhere.

But in that case, we have an obligation to watch the way this war is being conducted, too. We need to be particularly attentive to the protection of human rights in this arena, as well. After all, we are not only bound to this part of the globe by heritage but, by virtue of the post-war agreements we accepted in 1945, we had a hand in creating the situation, as well.

Anyone watching the situation needs to wonder about both those things. What is left of civil rights there is debatable. The way the war is being conducted is not.

At this point, it is not a matter of who's right and who's wrong -- Israelis or Palestinians -- in this long-term dispute over land. There is more than enough blame to go around here -- as there is in all wars. Even Americans are finding out that U.S. soldiers have no monopoly on the principles of chivalry. They torture detainees taken at random and bomb civilians as well as so-called "military targets" that are right in the middle of cities. And now they are being accused of raping women, killing babies and murdering whole families in this rampage called "war." And they do it just like everybody else.

Israel, for instance, has killed over 2,500 Palestinians, 20 percent of them under 18 years of age. They built a wall through Jerusalem and around Palestinian villages that has separated a people from itself. They have bulldozed houses to make the point of who's in charge here. But they have also submitted their own civil and military infractions to their own courts and abided by those findings.

The Palestinians, on the other hand -- for all intents and purposes powerless before the U.S.-supported Israeli military -- simply resisted in place for years but, at the same time, refused to negotiate. In fact, their non-violent economic resistance has been their most potent defense of all, the one most clearly, even if incompletely, heard around the world.

Eventually, however, they took to taunting Israeli soldiers with stones and small arms fire. They blew to bits both themselves and unarmed Jewish civilians on buses and in coffee shops and in the midst of Jewish weddings. They began to lob missiles over the wall with no regard for targeting at all. And when given the chance to choose a peacemaker over a militant to lead them, they made an overwhelming

choice for those who are vowed to destroy Israel, however long it takes.

There are without doubt justifiable complaints on both sides.

Right now, though, the political complaints are almost secondary. The real problem is that the way the conflict is now being conducted is not sane. It has gone beyond the bounds of reason. It has become raw violence, brutal destruction, totally disproportionate revenge.

For the sake, we are told, of one kidnapped soldier to begin with and now for the sake of two more at the time of this writing, Gaza is being pounded. Civilians are being killed. Electric and water are gone. And, in the latest show of force, Lebanon is also being pummelled, apparently for tolerating the Hezbollah, a radical Shi'ite group dedicated to the destruction of Israel and now lobbing its own bombs into Israel territory.

The boys are really having a go at one another, this time. Like drunken bullies in a street fight, it's a tussle with brass knuckles in which only one side has the whips and the chains and the other side refuses to say "uncle." Very macho. Not very manly.

And what is the world doing about it?

We have the SPCA, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, to stop this from happening to house pets and wild creatures.

We have rules in prize fights that require the management to end an event before either fighter suffers brain damage. Or death.

We don't allow exotic animals -- lions, snakes, big cats -- inside city boundaries.

And if we do all this to protect animals, people and professional fighters from danger, why wouldn't we do something to save old men, widows and children from becoming political carnage?

When is the referee going to call this fight?

And why is the president of the United States saying that "Israel has a right to defend itself" when there is nothing about the present irrational response that can in any way be called "defense." Whatever you think about the viability of war as a moral strategy, this is not, by any of the rules of war, defense. It is mayhem.

Is it anti-semitic to want human beings to act humanely?

Why are we allowing this to go on when we should be stopping every cent of aid to both sides until their money for weapons runs out and this latest matter is resolved within some kind of human context?

From where I stand, it's in our own interests to do something to stop this. After all, we don't have an SPCA for humans. And this thing threatens us all.

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