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U.S. bishop on Syria: Dialogue is 'only option'

Joshua J. McElwee | Aug. 30, 2013
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A key U.S. bishop is calling on the United States to work for a cease-fire in Syria, telling Secretary of State John Kerry that dialogue "is the only option to put an end to the conflict and to the violence."

Bishop Richard Pates, who heads the U.S. bishops Committee on International Justice and Peace, made the request in a letter [1] sent to Kerry on Thursday and made public Friday morning.

The U.S. bishops "make our own" the words that Pope Francis used Sunday in commenting on the situation in Syria, Pates told Kerry, who is Catholic. The "clash of weapons [must] be silenced," Pates said, quoting the pope's weekly Angelus address. "It is not conflict that offers prospects of hope for solving problems, but rather the capacity for encounter and dialogue."

"We ask the United States to work with other governments to obtain a cease-fire, initiate serious negotiations, provide impartial and neutral humanitarian assistance, and encourage building an inclusive society in Syria that protects the rights of all its citizens, including Christians and other minorities," Pates, the bishop of Des Moines, Iowa, said in conclusion.

The release of Pates' letter comes as White House and Pentagon officials are saying in media interviews that President Barack Obama is considering launching a military strike against Syria, even as the British Parliament refused to authorize an effort by Prime Minister David Cameron to involve British forces in such a strike.

Speaking from the White House later Friday afternoon, Obama said he had not decided what action the U.S. military would be taking in Syria, but that any strike would be a "limited, narrow act" that would not lead to an "open ended commitment."

?What we will do is consider options that meet the narrow concern around chemical weapons," Obama said.

The letter also comes as clergy around the world and ethicists in the United States have been raising questions about the legality and morality of such an attack, which Obama has said is needed as a punitive measure against Syrian President Bashar Assad after an attack last week near the capital of Damascus reportedly involved use of chemical weapons.

The head of the German bishops' commission for international church affairs, Archbishop Ludwig Schick of Bamberg, told Catholic news agency KNA on Wednesday that an armed intervention could not be justified in Catholic teaching, which required "total certainty of the confirmed damage" as well as "serious chance of success" and a capacity to avoid "worse damage than that to be eliminated."

While Obama and U.S. officials have said they are certain Assad's government carried out the Aug. 21 chemical weapons attack, the Syrian government has blamed rebels who have been fighting the government since 2011. U.N. weapons inspectors are supposed to report on the situation to U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on

Saturday.

Warnings against military intervention have also been voiced by church leaders in the Middle East, including Archbishop Fouad Twal, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem; Syrian-born Melkite Catholic Patriarch Gregoire III Laham; and Chaldean Bishop Antoine Audo of Aleppo.

Speaking to *NCR* on Thursday, several prominent U.S. Catholic ethicists and scholars said an American attack in Syria would be difficult to justify under the traditional tenets of Catholic moral teaching, especially under the just war theory, which states that a set of specific moral criteria must be met before any military action can be justified.

One of those criteria, said the director of policy studies at the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, is that the right authority is undertaking the military action.

"Under international law, it's unmistakably clear that when self-defense is not at stake, the proper authority to act is the U.N. Security Council," said David Cortright, who has also written 17 books on issues ranging from nonviolent social change to nuclear disarmament.

Before continuing with military action, Cortright said, there must also be a more clear indication of who exactly was responsible for the chemical weapons attack. That indication, he said, would come from a "step-by-step process" of investigation, a referral to the International Criminal Court and sanctions against those responsible.

"Perhaps some kind of action will be necessary, but it should be debated and decided in a multilateral forum," he said.

"Under any moral code, revenge or punishment for its own sake is not a legitimate military act under just war doctrine," Cortright continued. "We can use force for self-defense, to protect the innocent, or to prevent atrocities. But simply to punish someone who has committed a crime through military action, I'm not aware of any ethical doctrine that would permit that as a basis for action."

Tobias Winright, an associate professor of theological ethics at Saint Louis University known for his work on political violence and just war issues, said he "just could not see" how a U.S. strike could be ethically justified.

"Dropping bombs there actually may lead to even greater evils than what we're trying to stop in the first place," said Winright, who in 2010 co-wrote *After the Smoke Clears: The Just War Tradition and Post War Justice*.

"What if it leads to a bigger war?" Winright asked. "We need to try to determine if the good from this is going to outweigh the evil, or if it is going to lead to greater evil."

Not going forward with a military strike "doesn't mean that the only option is doing nothing, either," Winright said, referring to the idea of a "peace force" proposed Thursday by the Catholic peace group Pax Christi International.

The group, an international coalition headquartered in Brussels akin to Amnesty International that maintains separate national groups in many countries, suggested Pope Francis could assemble Catholic leaders to join those of other faiths to "accompany the Syrian people through this time of great danger and suffering."

"We need religious leaders like that to step it up and go there," Winright said. "It's risky, it's dangerous, but it might be necessary."

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