

## Key US bishop: Syria strike would cause 'inevitable havoc'

Joshua J. McElwee | Aug. 30, 2013 NCR Today

The U.S. bishop elected by the nation's Catholic prelates to represent the church on international issues of justice said Friday that "negotiation is the resolution" to the conflict in Syria, not U.S. military intervention.

Des Moines, Iowa, Bishop Richard Pates, who heads the U.S. bishops' office of international justice and peace, made his remarks in an *NCR* phone interview, hours after publishing of a letter from him to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on the matter stated dialogue was the ["only option."](#) [1]

"The possibility of a diplomatic resolution seems much more appealing than the inevitable havoc and pain and suffering and deaths, especially to innocent civilians that will occur by any military undertaking of the United States," Pates said in the interview.

"I think that we can phrase it in a lot of different ways, but we have to hopefully have learned something from Iraq, with the unintended consequences."

Pates' remarks came as Kerry and President Barack Obama made separate statements in Washington Friday afternoon outlining the reasoning for a possible U.S. military strike in Syria.

Kerry said U.S. intelligence agencies had "high confidence" that a reported chemical weapons attack in the country Aug. 21 had been conducted by forces loyal to the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Obama said that while he had not decided what action the U.S. military would take, any strike would be a "limited, narrow act."

UN weapons inspectors are to report on the situation to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Saturday.

Speaking in the interview, Pates said "negotiation is the most important element of all of this in obtaining the diplomatic resolution rather than always going back to the military escalation."

Following is *NCR*'s full interview with Pates, conducted by phone and edited slightly for clarity and length.

***NCR:* Is there some sort of barometer the bishops are using to evaluate the situation regarding the U.S. and Syria? Obviously things are evolving rather quickly, particularly as Secretary Kerry said today there's a "high confidence" in the intelligence evidence. Is there a way the bishops are looking at this?**

*Pates:* I think our position is very strong, in conjunction with the Holy Father, is that we feel that this situation must be addressed through diplomacy, with a negotiated resolution in the best interests of all. You know, Pope Francis' mantra is "dialogue, dialogue, dialogue."

And while that may for some seem to be unrealistic, if we're ever going to change the pattern of these conflicts in only looking to a military solution, then we're really going to have to strive after that.

The possibility of a diplomatic resolution seems much more appealing than the inevitable havoc and pain and

suffering and deaths, especially to innocent civilians that will occur by any military undertaking of the United States.

I think that we can phrase it in a lot of different ways, but we have to hopefully have learned something from Iraq, with the unintended consequences. And you know how difficult it has been also in Afghanistan.

The position of the bishops and the position of the pope remain steady and very direct that negotiation is the resolution. The best outcome will be through this process of negotiation.

**The U.S. administration is saying that the use of chemical weapons is so abhorrent that there needs to be some sort of response.**

I think the response has to be a real dedication to and offensive on negotiations that would bring the war to an end, to begin with. And then, through the international organizations, to bring some sort of a direction or action to seek to rid the world of the possibility [of chemical weapon attack] in the future.

I think the action has to be a unified one to the United Nations. And that whatever might be punitive in character would not be a military exercise, but some way to show that this is not acceptable behavior.

We're not trying to say that this is acceptable behavior -- we're saying, "How can it be resolved?"

**Pax Christi International released their [own statement](#) [2] yesterday. They asked the pope to consider a "peace force" -- to ask faith leaders to go to Syria to accompany people there. Is that something the bishops might consider?**

I think that we're open to whatever would be effective to achieve these ends, and whatever secure means would be provided so that we're able to continue to exercise moral leadership.

**Are there plans among the bishops to keep discussing this? Or, if there's an attack to have some sort of a response?**

I think we're following the situation closely, monitoring it on an hourly basis so that we would certainly voice our concern. I think it sounds quite repetitious because we have consistently said that negotiation is the most important element of all of this in obtaining the diplomatic resolution rather than always going back to the military escalation.

**Your statement today said that the conference as a whole makes as its own the pope's words. As these discussions are unfolding at the bishops' conference, who's around the table? Is it the administrative committee, or is it you on behalf of the office of international justice and peace?**

Day-by-day operations are conducted by the office of international justice and peace, but we certainly consult with the members of the administrative committee. But they're 30 or 40, I think, in number so it's practically unrealistic.

The office of international justice and peace and its chairman and its committee -- the chairman is selected by the bishops at large for this role. So just like one of us speaks for worship, they're interim spokespersons. But I think on this issue we feel very confident that we're representing the body.

But when we get together, we're due to get together in September, it doesn't mean the administrative committee would not step up and also make a statement or take a position.

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