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Dolan, bishops tell Obama: Syria attack 'counterproductive'

Joshua J. McElwee | Sep. 4, 2013 NCR Today
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Two key U.S. bishops wrote to President Barack Obama Wednesday, telling him that a planned U.S. military strike in Syria would be "counterproductive [and] will exacerbate an already deadly situation."

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Des Moines, Iowa, Bishop Richard Pates, leaders of the U.S. bishops' conference, add their voices to a growing number of Catholic prelates and Christian leaders around the world criticizing the expected U.S. attack.

"We have heard the urgent calls of the Successor of Saint Peter, Pope Francis, and our suffering brother bishops of the venerable and ancient Christian communities of the Middle East," Dolan and Pates write in the letter, made public by the bishops' conference Wednesday afternoon.

"As one, they beg the international community not to resort to military intervention in Syria," the prelates continue [1]. "They have made it clear that a military attack will be counterproductive, will exacerbate an already deadly situation, and will have unintended negative consequences."

Dolan serves as president of the U.S. bishops' conference. Pates is the head of its office of international justice and peace.

Publishing of the bishops' letter comes as the U.S. Congress is receiving briefings and updates from the Obama administration, which is seeking congressional approval for a military strike against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's government.

Secretary of State John Kerry, a Catholic, is briefing the House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee on the matter Wednesday afternoon. In a similar briefing before the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee Tuesday, Kerry said U.S. intelligence had evidence "beyond a reasonable doubt" that Assad's government had perpetrated an Aug. 21 chemical weapons attack against rebel forces in the country.

Staff at the U.S. bishops' conference called on Tuesday for Catholics across the nation to urge their members of Congress to vote against the authorization of the use of force. In an "action alert" sent by email Tuesday, the bishops' staff asked Catholics [2] to tell their representatives to instead work towards an immediate ceasefire in Syria and to encourage "serious, inclusive negotiations for peace."

In their letter Wednesday, Pates and Dolan make a similar request.

"The longstanding position of our Conference of Bishops is that the Syrian people urgently need a political solution," the prelates write to Obama.

"We ask the United States to work urgently and tirelessly with other governments to obtain a ceasefire, initiate serious negotiations, provide impartial humanitarian assistance, and encourage efforts to build an inclusive

society in Syria that protects the rights of all its citizens, including Christians and other minorities."

Pates had made a similar request of Kerry in an Aug. 29 letter to the secretary of state, telling him [3] that dialogue "is the only option to put an end to the conflict and to the violence."

Later in an *NCR* interview [4], Pates said any U.S. strike in Syria would cause "inevitable havoc and pain and suffering and deaths, especially to innocent civilians."

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/middle-east/syria/letter-to-president-obama-from-cardinal-dolan-and-bishop-pates-regarding-syria-2013-09-04.cfm
[2] http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/take-action-now/capwiz/capwiz-alerts-syria.cfm
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/58796
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/58806
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