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

U.S. bishops, Iranian ayatollahs hold dialogue on nuclear arms

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | May. 15, 2014
Washington

Quietly, a small group of U.S. Catholic bishops and Iranian ayatollahs began in March what they intend to be an ongoing dialogue on nuclear weapons and the role of faith leaders in influencing political moves on the issue of Iran's nuclear program.

The meetings in Iran, hosted by the Supreme Council of Seminary Teachers of Qom, began with basic discussions of areas of philosophical and theological commonality between Catholicism and Islam and concluded with a commitment to issue a joint statement, said the U.S. bishop who led the delegation.

The four-day session between three U.S. bishops and four prominent Muslim scholars and ayatollahs began with contacts facilitated by two Iranian-American doctoral students of John Steinbruner, a professor of public policy at the University of Maryland and a consultant to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on International Peace and Justice.

Committee chairman Bishop Richard Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, told Catholic News Service Tuesday that the trip was keeping with the emphasis by Pope Francis on dialogue being "the key to discovering truth and avoiding misunderstanding."

He explained that Steinbruner had suggested such a dialogue to the committee. Once the bishops agreed, he and the students, along with USCCB staff, spent a year making arrangements. The State Department and the Vatican were advised of the project, but it remained an independent activity.

Pates was accompanied by Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, who has lengthy expertise in the Middle East, and Auxiliary Bishop Denis Madden of Baltimore, chairman of the USCCB Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

Stephen Colecchi, director of the USCCB's Office of International Justice and Peace, told CNS that word of the bishops' March 11-17 trip to Iran was not made public until May because it wasn't until then that the participants had the chance to report on the dialogue to members of Congress and a deputy secretary of state.

Colecchi and Steinbruner accompanied the bishops, as did Ebrahim Mohseni, a University of Maryland doctoral candidate. The Islamic clerics who participated were Ayatollah Morteza Moghtadaei, vice president of the Supreme Council of the Seminary Teachers of Qom; Grand Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi Amoli, Ayatollah Sayed Jawad Shahrestani and Ayatollah Ali-Reza Arafi.

Word of the dialogue came out just as a round of talks were being held in Vienna about Iran's nuclear program. The so-called P5+1, the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council (the United States, China, France, Russia and the United Kingdom) plus Germany, began drafting a plan of action toward resolving fears about Iran developing nuclear weapons, according to the State Department.

At a briefing Tuesday in Vienna on the P5+1 talks, a senior State Department official said "everyone has approached these talks with seriousness and with professionalism. It also appears that everyone has come to the table wanting a diplomatic solution, but having the intent doesn't mean it will necessarily happen. Quite frankly, this is very, very difficult. I would caution people that just because we will be drafting it certainly doesn't mean an agreement is imminent or that we are certain to eventually get to a resolution of these issues."

The official added that "there are a range of complicated issues to address. And we do not know if Iran will be able to make the tough decisions they must to ensure the world that they will not obtain a nuclear weapon and that their program is for entirely peaceful purposes, as they have said."

Pates said that in their sessions, the Iranian religious leaders and the bishops began from the common belief of Muslims and Catholics in the existence of one God who created humans and that therefore every person is to be revered. A second point of commonality came from the teaching of both faiths that because of their creation by God, each person has basic rights and human dignity.

The Muslim and Catholic leaders agreed that the use of nuclear weapons is immoral because innocent lives would inevitably be lost, Pates said. From there, discussions considered the morality of a government obtaining weapons capabilities in order to defend its people from outside threats.

Pates said they also touched on the morality of economic sanctions against Iran, which are intended to pressure the government to stop its pursuit of nuclear weapons capability.

He said the delegation saw no particular evidence of poverty or other obvious effects of the sanctions, but that they heard stories of their impact. One of the ayatollahs, for example, told him that two of his sisters-in-law died of cancers that would normally have been readily treatable with medicines. Although medications are exempt from the sanctions, the religious leader told him, restrictions on finances mean it is often quite difficult to pay for exempt items to be imported.

"It's almost a given from the American perspective that the sanctions are working," Pates said. "Some want to tighten them."

But he said among the group that went to Iran, discussion arose about whether the Iranian people have responded to the sanctions with a renewed sense of national unity -- much as Americans rallied together during World War II shortages of basic commodities -- rather than with any feeling that they should hold their own government responsible for the hardships imposed by other countries.

"Suffering for a patriotic purpose," the bishop described the theory.

The U.S. bishops also met with Christian religious leaders in Iran, Pates said.

The Iran trip was followed in April by a "Colloquium on Revitalizing Catholic Engagement on Nuclear Disarmament" co-sponsored by Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies in collaboration with the USCCB; Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs; and Boston College.

Pates was a co-convener of the event that drew 40 bishops, policy specialists, scholars and students at a session at Stanford University in California hosted by former secretaries of state George Shultz and William Perry.

"The bishops have made the moral case for ultimate nuclear disarmament," Pates said, adding that Shultz, Perry, former U.S. Democratic Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia, who also attended the colloquium, and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger "have made the case for disarmament as a policy goal, a goal embraced by the U.S. and Russian governments. My hope is that this colloquium will be the beginning of a process to invigorate and refine the voice of the U.S. Catholic community in the debate on nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament."

A press release about the event from the University of Notre Dame quoted Shultz as saying: "Nuclear weapons present an existential threat to mankind. We need to reduce the numbers of these weapons, identify and take the steps needed to keep them under better control, and ultimately eliminate them."

The Next Step FORWARD [2]

DONATE NOW [2]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [2]

Source URL (retrieved on *05/04/2015 - 23:57*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/us-bishops-iranian-ayatollahs-hold-dialogue-nuclear-arms

Links:
[1] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/in-content
[2] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end