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Syria strike would fuel conflict, Dolan and bishops tell Congress

Joshua J. McElwee | Sep. 5, 2013 NCR Today
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A day after they wrote President Barack Obama, telling him that a planned U.S. military strike in Syria would be "counterproductive [and] will exacerbate an already deadly situation," two key U.S. bishops have sent a similar message to each of the 535 members of Congress.

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Des Moines, Iowa, Bishop Richard Pates, leaders of the U.S. bishops' conference, send their message the same day Pope Francis wrote to the leaders of the Group of 20 gathering in St. Petersburg, Russia, calling [1] a military solution in Syria "futile."

"We remain profoundly concerned for the more than 100,000 Syrians who have lost their lives, the more than 2 million who have fled the country as refugees, and the more than 4 million within Syria who have been driven from their homes by the violence," Dolan and Pates write in their letter [2], which the U.S. bishops' conference says was sent Thursday to every member of Congress.

"Our focus is on the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Syria and on saving lives by ending the conflict, not fueling it," Dolan and Pates write.

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-members are deciding whether to give Obama congressional approval for a military strike against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's government.

Following briefings on the matter from Secretary of State John Kerry, a Catholic, the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee voted 10-7 Wednesday to approve a resolution authorizing such a strike.

Among the senators voting for approval were two who identify as Catholic, Dick Durbin (D-Illinois) and Tim Kaine (D-Virginia). Among those voting to deny authorization were also two who identify Catholic, Jim Risch (R-Idaho) and Marco Rubio (R-Florida). Ed Markey (D-Massachusetts), who additionally identifies Catholic, voted present.

Writing to the congress-members, Pates and Dolan say the representatives face a "central moral question."

"Will more or less lives and livelihoods be destroyed by military intervention?" the prelates ask.

"On this question Pope Francis has been clear," they say. "Instead of employing armed force, in this situation our nation, working with the international community, should direct all of its energies urgently and tirelessly toward dialogue and negotiation."

In their letter to Obama Wednesday [3], Pates and Dolan used much of the same language, urging the president to listen to the pope's message and to warnings of Christian leaders in Syria opposed to a U.S. strike.

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