

Seventh Assembly Statement on the Gulf War, the Middle East, and the Threat to World Peace, Canberra, Australia, February 1991

Preamble

As we gather in the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches, a war of terrible proportions is being waged in the Gulf. Kuwait was already ravaged by Iraqi invading forces. Now, both Kuwait and Iraq are being destroyed by bombardment of unprecedented intensity. Hour by hour this war claims a mounting toll of victims on all sides, combatants and non-combatants alike, our own sisters and brothers. As we met, news was received of the horrible bombing of a shelter in Baghdad killing hundreds of people who sought refuge there, many of them children and women. At this very moment, preparations are being made for a ground battle which is certain to cause greater destruction and loss of life. It is a war of ominous dimensions which threatens the destruction of the land and the people it seeks to liberate. Day by day the war escalates, drawing in more and more nations of the Gulf, the Middle East, and other parts of the world. It squanders the resources of rich and poor countries alike, and no end is in sight.

Intensive efforts were made around the world to prevent this war and avoid its escalation. Urgent appeals were made by leaders of nations not to abandon non-violent efforts to cause Iraq to withdraw unconditionally from Kuwait and resolve its differences with its neighbor through negotiations. The churches pleaded with the leaders of their nations not to aggravate further the long-standing conflict in the Middle East which time and again has brought war and violence to the region; created a climate of fear and mistrust between Israel and the Arab nations; led to the suffering of Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, and to the continuing occupation of Palestinian territories and parts of Lebanon and to the invasion and partial occupation of Cyprus; inflicted suffering upon the Palestinian people who have been deprived of their rights to self-determination, statehood and national dignity, and exacerbated conflicts within the countries of the region, delaying justice for national minorities like the Kurdish people.

War promises no lasting solution for the festering wounds of the Middle East, no just, peaceful and durable regional or world order, but rather continued insecurity, pain and conflict.

It is never too soon nor too late to seek peace and a comprehensive settlement. So once again, together, our hearts cry out to the leaders of the nations, especially to those of the coalition forces led by the United States of America and of Iraq: Cease the bombing! Still the missiles! Stop the fighting! Restrain your armies! Negotiate! Trust in the promise of peace!

Peacemaking, the believers' calling

We confess that many of us and our churches have for too long been confused, timid and unfaithful in the face of the daunting complexity of the decades-long problems confronting the Middle East. We have failed to disassociate ourselves from the institutions of militarism which view war either as a solution to human conflicts or as a necessary evil, or to avoid complicity with the powers who trust more in armed might than in the rule of law or the ability of the human spirit to achieve justice by peaceful means.

During this Assembly we have sought to open our hearts and minds to one another and to the Holy Spirit, and we have renewed our resolve to be peace-makers, conscious of the cost of being disciples of the Prince of Peace.

The participants in the WCC World Convocation on Justice Peace and the Integrity of Creation (Seoul, 1990) declared: "We will resist doctrines and systems of security based on the use of, and deterrence by, all weapons of mass destruction, and military interventions and occupations." It is imperative that the churches hear and respond now to this challenge.

The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Amsterdam, 1948) was delayed by a looming world war, and every subsequent Assembly has been confronted with the prospect or reality of war. Yet, consistently and persistently, the World Council of Churches has sought lasting peace through efforts to eliminate injustices which give rise to war, to create and strengthen institutions capable of safeguarding international peace and security, and in the event of war, to aid the victims.

The peace we seek, as the Vancouver Assembly (1983) reminded the churches, "is not just the absence of war. Peace requires a new international order based on justice for and within all the nations, and respect for the God-given humanity and dignity of every person. Peace is, as the Prophet Isaiah has taught us, the effect of righteousness."

We trust in the knowledge that the world belongs to God, not to the powers of this world, and we take courage and hope from God's promise of peace, righteousness and justice which was embodied in Jesus Christ and made present among us through the work of the Holy Spirit. With God's help, peace is possible even now.

The Churches' advocacy for a just peace in the Gulf and the Middle East

The World Council of Churches has repeatedly advocated respect for international law and a peaceful resolution of this conflict. It has:

strongly opposed Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait;

welcomed the Security Council's demand that Iraq withdraw immediately and unconditionally from Kuwait and its appeal to Iraq and Kuwait to initiate intensive negotiations for the resolution of their differences;

supported the application of strict sanctions banning all commercial dealings and trade with Iraq, with the exception of medical supplies and foodstuffs in humanitarian circumstances;

called upon the Security Council to enforce with equal vigor its earlier resolutions on the territorial integrity of Lebanon, the division and occupation of Cyprus, Israel's withdrawal from the territories it occupied in 1967, and the right of every State in the area, including Israel, to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force;

appealed for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the region and the exploration of all avenues for negotiations to defuse the crisis and obtain a peaceful settlement;

declared as morally unacceptable the holding of foreign nationals in Iraq and Kuwait, appealed to the Iraqi government to facilitate the departure of all foreign nationals desiring to do so, and appealed for strict application of international norms for the protection of refugees.

Around the world, member churches and regional ecumenical bodies took the lead in pressing for peace along these same lines:

The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) sought a regional solution to the conflict, at the same time expressing hope for a comprehensive, just resolution for all the conflicts and occupations in the region in order to bring harmony and peace among Muslims, Christians and Jews in the region. It contributed significantly to assisting the refugees and other victims of the conflict.

The National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA appealed repeatedly to the U.S. Administration and Congress not to abandon sanctions as a means to obtain an end to the occupation of Kuwait, warning against the rapidly escalating military response of the U.S. government to the crisis and the apparently open-ended nature of U.S. military involvement in the region. A delegation of U.S. church leaders traveled to Iraq and other states of the region in an expression of ecumenical concern and solidarity.

The Canadian Council of Churches issued similar appeals to its own government and also sent a delegation to the region, meeting with leaders of churches and of other religious faith communities.

The Conference of European Churches (CEC) and national councils of churches in Europe warned against acceptance of the inevitability of war, recalling the conviction of the European churches, expressed at the European Ecumenical Assembly (Basel, 1989) that war is against the will of God and that everything should be done to further peaceful resolution of conflicts.

The Latin America Council of Churches (CLAI) urged the UN to redouble efforts for a peaceful solution, and churches in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific drew attention to the grave effects of the crisis on their nations and cautioned governments against military or economic support for efforts to achieve a military solution.

The widening effects of the conflict in the Middle East

When Iraq refused to withdraw from Kuwait, massive forces of the coalition led by the United States were deployed in the Gulf and three months later began bombing both Kuwait and Iraq. Iraq launched missiles on Israel, some of which fell in Palestinian areas. This has caused fear and suffering in Israel, which has not retaliated. But it has imposed a blanket curfew in the Occupied Territories, further worsening the already desperate plight of Palestinians who feel unprotected, abandoned by the world community and fear for their future, and heightening tensions in the whole region.

Lebanon's hard-won, fragile peace was disrupted as missiles were launched on Israel from its territory. Israel retaliated with a renewal of heavy punitive bombing raids on Lebanese towns and villages. This has placed further obstacles in the way of the Lebanese Government and Army in their efforts to establish their authority over this strife-torn land.

Smoldering fires of tension throughout the region have been fanned as countries from the northern limits of the Middle East to the Horn of Africa. Turkey, Iran, Jordan, Sudan and others have been drawn into the sphere of confrontation. Indeed, the whole of the region, including Iraq, is armed with huge arsenals of the most modern weaponry, much of it provided by the governments and industries of countries participating in the coalition forces. The whole of the Middle East is a powder-keg which could explode in a moment. And with the presence of chemical, biological and nuclear weaponry in and around the region a conflagration could rapidly escape the confines of the Gulf.

All wars have serious side effects, but the oil spillage which has already occurred in the Gulf, and the estimated consequences for the global warming of the earth's atmosphere should the oil wells of Kuwait, Iraq and Saudi Arabia be set ablaze, show that the potential of this war for widespread, even global ecological destruction is exceptional.

The global implications of the war

In fact, the war already has global impact. Among its chief victims have been the poor nations of the world, many of whom are already beset by internal conflicts and massive foreign debt.

Their peoples were among the first to suffer. Workers in the Middle East from countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Philippines, India and Korea were either trapped in war zones or forced to flee under excruciating circumstances. The war has added to the drain on these nations' economies, some of which depended heavily on remittances - from their nationals employed in the region - which have now been cut off.

The war has dealt a massive economic blow to much of the developing world, eliminating major markets for primary exports, causing prices for fuels and petroleum products and for basic foodstuffs like rice and grain to skyrocket, and making the cost of other essential imports prohibitive for the poor.

The war has led to new acts and threats of terrorism in several parts of the world.

The war has fanned the flames of religious, ethnic and regional conflicts in many countries, especially in Asia, seriously destabilizing some and giving rise to violent conflicts in others.

The preoccupation of the global mass media, governments, and international institutions with the war in the Gulf has distracted attention from efforts to resolve other armed conflicts raging around the world and from other massive human tragedies. It is estimated, for example, that some 20 million people are on the brink of starvation and death in the African countries of Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Angola, Mozambique and Liberia. At this time of war, much of the world has turned a deaf ear to their cries for help.

The United Nations, the Gulf War, and the "New World Order"

The World Council of Churches promoted the formation of the United Nations and through representatives of the member churches it was present when the Charter was adopted. Since the Amsterdam Assembly (1948) it has supported the UN and, especially through its Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, a leading non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, the WCC has contributed to the success of the UN and its related agencies.

The achievements of the United Nations over the years have been notable in many fields. Even during the past decade of the greatest neglect by the major powers, it continued to lay the groundwork for a role in the peaceful resolution of international conflicts. Much of this work came to fruition after 1985 when the UN was instrumental in negotiating an end to the Iran/Iraq war, the war in Afghanistan, and a settlement of the long-standing dispute over Namibia and guiding it to independence; brought closer the end of apartheid in South Africa through the application of comprehensive sanctions; and played a new, more energetic role in promoting the settlement of regional conflicts in Central America and elsewhere.

The words of the late Bishop Bell at the First Assembly (Amsterdam, 1948) remain pertinent, however. "International law", he said, "clearly requires international institutions for its effectiveness. These institutions, if they are to command respect and obedience of nations, must come to grips with international problems on their own merits and not primarily in the light of national interests... The United Nations was designed to promote friendly relations among the nations. Its purposes in these respects deserve the support of Christians. But unless the nations surrender a greater measure of national sovereignty in the interest of the common good, they will be tempted to have recourse to war in order to enforce their claims."

The churches and the general public in most parts of the world supported the initial action of the UN Security Council in condemning the invasion of Kuwait and the application of sanctions to enforce its call for Iraq's withdrawal from this occupied country. They would very much have preferred that the United Nations itself had taken all decisions and the

limited actions necessary to end the aggression. Unfortunately member nations have not yet empowered the UN for such a role.

By adopting Security Council resolution 678, which authorized "member states... to use all necessary means to implement previous resolutions", the UN placed itself in danger of being blamed for being unduly dependent upon a powerful nation or group of nations and for appearing to authorize a large-scale war which is not in the interests of an international order of peace based on law.

The question of how major international decisions are made has become one of pressing urgency in the world today. The lessons learned from the way this first major world crisis in the post-Cold War era has been handled by the international community demand a critical examination of the emerging new world order. No one government or group of governments should either take or be allowed to take primary responsibility for the resolution of major conflicts beyond their own borders.

For the Security Council or the Secretary-General, in the exercise of his good offices, to be for some reason unable to act independently and in the true spirit of the UN Charter would be unacceptable. The community of nations cannot afford such a weakening of the UN system. For the sake of world peace, for the sake of the rule of law, for the sake of the authority of the United Nations, its position as guarantor of a comprehensive international peace order must be strengthened.

It is imperative, for the sake of world peace, the rule of law, and the credibility of the United Nations, that the parties to the Gulf war cease immediately the hostilities and invest their efforts in the pursuit of a negotiated peace.

For the sake of all peoples it is time to build a new world order of justice, the foundation stone of peace:

a world economic order which ends the domination and exploitation of the poor by the rich;

information and communication systems which - as the World Convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) (Seoul, 1990), said - offer all peoples truth in place of distortion, and media disposed to peace rather than violence; and which redress the concentration of control over global communications media in the hands of a few powerful nations and corporations;

an environmental order which respects the integrity of God's creation and controls the industrialized nations' insatiable thirst for oil - a major source of global conflict, as this war shows, and of widespread damage to the environment - and leads them to adopt new energy policies which promote conservation.

The impact of racism and intolerance

The war in the Gulf reveals the tragic impact of racism on both the international and domestic policies of nations from which indigenous peoples are often the first to suffer.

Internationally, there is a shocking rise in discrimination against persons of Arab nationality, background or appearance. In the name of "national security" and "prevention of terrorism", many are subjected to systematic humiliation, harassment, preventive detention, and open threat of physical harm by both state authorities and private groups in many nations around the world.

Anti-Muslim intolerance is on the increase in many Western countries, fed by the portrayal of Islam as an inherently menacing religion. As a result, many Muslims feel humiliated and angry, and the future of Christian-Muslim relations - so crucial to peace and harmony in many parts of the world - risks being gravely affected. At a time when there are manifestations of anti-Semitism in a number of countries, many Jews feel great anguish.

A disproportionate burden is being imposed on racial and ethnic minorities in this war. According to United States Department of Defense estimates, for example, 25% of U.S. troops deployed in the Gulf (and 29% of ground forces and 55% of women in uniform) are Black. Yet African-Americans comprise only slightly more than 11% of the civilian population over the age of 16. Corresponding figures for other racial or ethnic minority groups are not readily available, but it is safe to assume that Native Americans and persons of Hispanic background are similarly over-represented in the fighting forces. Concern rises for a generation of Black, Hispanic and Native American youth endangered by intense, endemic poverty, inadequate health care, the ever-rising incidence of AIDS, and the impact of drugs and drug-related crime. Now, many of those who joined the military in search of education, stable employment and a way out of these dangers, are at peril in the Gulf.

The situation and role of women

This particular conflict and the long-standing institutions of war and militarism that feed it are created, controlled, and perpetuated by men. Some women may at times support military solutions to conflicts and, increasingly, women participate as soldiers. In the rare circumstances where women lead governments, some of them promote policies leading to war. But most women and children are victimized by war and militarism. They become refugees, objects of sexual violence by occupation forces, and they are trapped in the midst of violence. Women and children are also the majority of those who are deprived of basic necessities when resources from institutions that enhance life are diverted to those that destroy it. In contrast to this victimization by forces in which they have little meaningful participation, women are often at the heart of movements for peace with justice and other activities that promote creative non-violent resolution of conflict. And women have taken the lead in urging that adversaries be recognized as full human beings rather than being made objects in enemy images.

The impact on youth

Modern warfare takes a particularly terrible toll on youth and children. There are indications that the chief victims both of the occupation of Kuwait and of the bombing of Iraq in retaliation are many infants and children. Young people make up the bulk of the armed forces exposed to battle. The youth of this Assembly have expressed concern that young men and women from many countries are called to fight in the Middle East in a war not of their making, and that young people are among the first to suffer from the economic deprivation and strife it is causing.

Appeals and Affirmations

Out of deep human concern for all these who are victimized by the war in the Gulf: the poor, the racially oppressed, women, youth, civilian victims, and those who out of loyalty or due to circumstance are engaged in conflict as members of the armed forces; out of our concern for justice, peace and the integrity of creation; and as an expression of our hope for a truly just, peaceful, democratic participatory world order and institutions able to govern and sustain it, we at the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Canberra, February 1991) cry out: Stop the war! Pursue the way of peace!

To the churches:

We urge you to be constant in prayer and pastoral care for the leaders of the nations and particularly for all those on every side caught up in or victimized by this tragic war: innocent civilians, those involved in the fighting, families and friends who grieve the separation or loss of their loved ones, and those who reject military service on grounds of conscience.

We appeal especially to the churches in arms exporting and importing countries to press for immediate steps to control this trade in death and destruction. The more lethal the weapons and the larger their number, the greater the violence and destruction of wars and conflicts. This uncontrolled trade denies the sanctity of human life and defiles the planet.

We reiterate the affirmation of the Sixth Assembly: "The churches today are called to confess anew their faith, and to repent for the times when Christians have remained silent in the face of injustice or threats to peace. The biblical vision of peace with justice for all, of wholeness, of unity for all God's people is not one of several options for the followers of Christ. It is an imperative in our time."

To the United Nations:

We urge you to reassert your role as peacemaker, peacekeeper, conciliator and negotiator.

We urge you to act now, decisively, to stop the war and to return to the strict application of non-violent sanctions - without deadlines - against Iraq, whose actions are in violation of international law and have been widely condemned by the nations.

We urge you to reconvene the Security Council on a continuing, emergency basis, to map a new course for peaceful negotiation of the dispute between Iraq and Kuwait and of the other outstanding conflicts in the region.

We urge you to move with all due speed to the convening of the International Peace Conference on the Middle East, called for by the 38th UN General Assembly (1983), to resolve the question of Palestine, to address the legitimate national rights of Palestinians to self-determination and an independent state of their own, and as a means to implement Security Council Resolution 242 (1967) which affirms the right of every State in the area, including Israel, "to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force". Meanwhile, we call for

international protection for the Palestinian people under occupation until such an International Peace Conference has done its work.

We also call for the initiation of a Conference on Peace, Security and Cooperation in the Middle East with the equal participation of all interested states and peoples as a further instrument for the achievement of a just and lasting settlement in the region which will bring about the mutual recognition of all states and effective guarantees for their security.

We urge you to be consistent in your actions to ensure the compliance of the nations with United Nations resolutions, especially those others calling for an end to illegal occupation of territory in the region of the Middle East: the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel in 1967, Lebanon, and Cyprus.

To the nations and their leaders:

We commend those nations who have exerted efforts to seek a negotiated solution to this conflict both before and after the engagement of the war, and encourage you to pursue them now with even greater vigor.

We call urgently and insistently on both Iraq and the coalition forces led by the United States to cease fire immediately and to work for a negotiated solution of the Iraq-Kuwait dispute within the context of the United Nations.

We urge all nations involved in the war to respect international norms for the protection of non-combatants in situations of armed conflict.

We appeal to the government of Iraq to signal its intention and offer guarantees that it will comply with Security Council Resolution 660 by withdrawing completely and unconditionally from the territory of Kuwait immediately upon the cessation of hostilities.

We call upon all external powers to withdraw all forces from the Middle East - except those required to perform a peace-keeping role under UN command - as a means to help restore a climate propitious for the pursuit of a lasting settlement of the region's conflicts.

We appeal to the Government of Israel to lift the blanket curfew that has been imposed on the Occupied Territories since the war began.

To peoples of other faiths:

In the presence of the representatives of other faiths who have been our guests during this Assembly, we commit ourselves to refuse to be separated from brothers and sisters of other faiths as a result of this war, and to reject especially any effort to divide Christians, Muslims and Jews whose faiths originated in the Middle East, and to join with them in prayers and common endeavors for peace in anticipation of the day when all may live together in peace and mutual respect.

Ever mindful that God rules with righteousness over all, we pray:

Come Holy Spirit
transform our lives,
lift and sustain us in this day.
Give wisdom and faith
that we may know
the great hope to which we are called.
Come, Holy Spirit,
renew the whole creation.